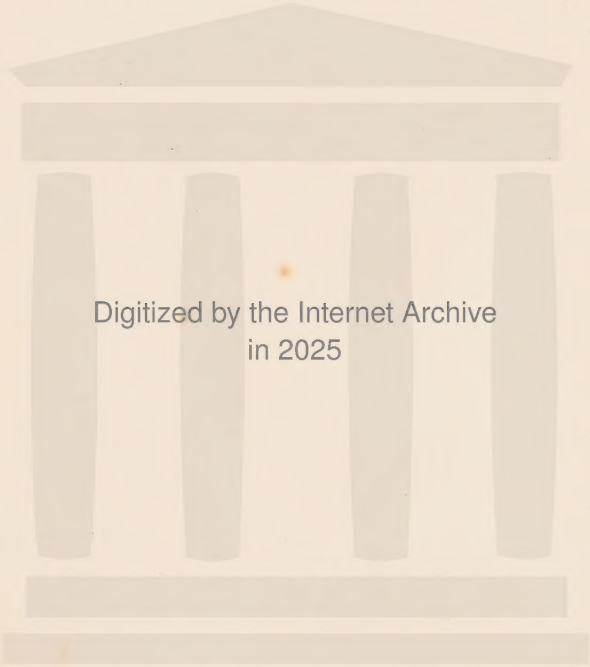
The New Prince Fortunatus

William Black

F. Lloyd


Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/newprincefortuna00blac_1

THE NEW PRINCE FORTUNATUS.

BY

WILLIAM BLACK,

AUTHOR OF

"A PRINCESS OF THULE," "MACLEOD OF DARE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, SEARLE, & RIVINGTON,

LIMITED,

St. Dunstan's House,

FETTER LANE, FLEET STREET, E.C.

1890.

[*All rights reserved.*]

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Aivron and Geinig	1
II.	The Phantom Stag	31
III.	A Globe of Gold-fish	65
IV.	A New Experience	98
V.	A Magnanimous Rival	133
VI.	'Let the Stricken Deer go weep' ...	168
VII.	An Awakening	200
VIII.	A Crisis	234

THE NEW PRINCE FORTUNATUS.

CHAPTER I.

AIVRON AND GEINIG.

Honnor Cunyngham was quite as proud as Lionel himself that he had killed a stag; for in a measure he was her pupil; at all events it was at her instigation that he was devoting himself to these athletic sports and pastimes, and so far withdrawing himself from the trivialities and affectations of the serious little band of amateurs. Not that Miss Cunyngham ever exhibited any disdain for those pursuits of her gifted sisters-in-law; no; she listened to Lady Sybil's music, and regarded Lady Rosamund's canvases, and even read the last MS. chapter of Lady Adela's new novel (for that great work was now in progress) with a grave good humour and even with a kind of benevolence; and it was only when one or the other of them,

with unconscious simplicity, named herself in conjunction with some master of the art she was professing—wondering how *he* could do such and such a thing in such and such a fashion when *she* found another method infinitely preferable—it was only at such moments that occasionally Honnor Cunyngham's clear hazel eyes would meet Lionel's, and the question they obviously asked was 'Is not that extraordinary?' They did not ask 'Is not that absurd?' or 'How can any one be so innocently and inordinately vain?'—they only expressed a friendly surprise, with perhaps the smallest trace of demure amusement.

On the other hand, if Miss Cunyngham rather intimated to this young guest and stranger that, being at a shooting-lodge in the Highlands, he ought to devote himself to the healthful and vigorous recreations of the place, instead of dawdling away his time in drawing-room frivolities, it was not that she herself should take possession of him as her comrade on her salmon-fishing excursions. He soon discovered that he was not to have any great encouragement in this direction. She was always very kind to him, no doubt; and she had certainly proposed that, if he cared to go with her, he could take the wading portions of the

pools; but beyond that she extended to him very little companionship, except what he made bold to claim. And the fact is, he was rather piqued by the curious isolation in which this young lady appeared to hold herself. She seemed so entirely content with herself; so wholly indifferent to the little attentions and flatteries of ordinary life: always good-natured when in the society of any one, she was just as satisfied to be left alone. Now Lionel Moore had not been used to this kind of treatment. Women had only been too ready to smile when he approached; perhaps, indeed, familiar success had rendered him callous; at all events he had managed to get along so far without encountering any violent experience of heart-aching desire and disappointment and despair. But this young lady with the clear, fine, intellectual face, the proud lips, the calm, observant eyes, puzzled him—almost vexed him. Nina, for example, was a far more sympathetic companion: either she was enthusiastically happy, talkative, vivacious, gay as a lark, or she was wilfully sullen and offended, to be coaxed round again and petted, like a spoilt child, until the natural sunshine of her humour came through those wayward clouds. But Miss Cunyngham, while always friendly and

pleasant, remained (as he thought) strangely remote, imperturbable, calm. She did not seem to care about his society at all. Perhaps she would rather have him go up the hill?—though the birds were getting rather wild now for a novice. In any case she could not refuse to let him accompany her on the morning after his deer-stalking expedition; for all the story had to be told her.

"I suppose you are very stiff," she said, cheerfully, as they left the lodge—he walking heavily in waders and brogues—old Robert coming up behind with rod and gaff. "But I should imagine you do not ask for much sympathy. Shall I tell you what you are thinking of at this moment? You have a vague fear that the foxes may have got at that precious animal during the night; and you are anxious to see it safely down here at the lodge; and you want to have the head sent at once to Mr. Macleay's in Inverness, so that it mayn't get mixed up with the lot of others which will be coming in when the driving in the big forests begins. Isn't that about it?"

"You are a witch," said he, "or else you have been deer-stalking yourself. But, you know, Miss Honnor, it's all very well to go on an expedition like that of yesterday once in a way—as a piece of

bravado, almost; and no doubt you are very proud when you see the dead stag lying on the heather before you; but I am not sure I should ever care for it as a continuous occupation, even if I were likely to have the chance. The excitement is too furious, too violent. But look at a day by the side of a salmon-river," continued this adroit young man. "There is absolute rest and peace—except when you are engaged in fighting a salmon; and for my own part, that is not necessary to my enjoyment at all. No; I would rather see you fish; then I know that everything is going right—that every pool is being properly cast over—that Robert is satisfied. And in the meantime I can sit and drink in all the beauty of the scenery—the quietude—the loneliness: that is a real change for me, after the busy life of London. I have got to be great friends with this river; I seem to have known it all my life; when we were coming home last evening, after being away in those awful solitudes, the sound of the Geinig was the most welcome thing I ever heard, I think."

"It is to the Geinig we are going now," said his companion, who appeared quite to ignore the insidious appeal conveyed in these touching sentiments. "I promised to leave all the Aivron

pools to Mr. Lestrange. But we may take the Junction Pool, for he won't have time to come beyond the Bad Step; and by the way, Mr. Moore, if you feel stiff after yesterday, going up and down the Bad Step won't do you any harm."

Well, the ascent of this Bad Step (whether so named from the French or the Gaelic nobody seemed to know) was not so difficult after all, for it was gradual; and a brief breathing-space on the summit showed them the far-stretching landscape terminating in the wild mountains of Assynt; but the sheer descent into the gloomy chasm on the other side was rather an awkward thing for any one encased in waders. However, Lionel managed somehow or another to slide and scramble down this zig-zag track on the face of the loose débris; they reached the bottom in safety, and crossed the burn; they followed a more secure pathway cut along the precipitous slope overlooking the Aivron; then they got down once more to the river-side, and found themselves walking over velvet-soft turf, in a wood of thinly scattered birch and hazel.

But when they emerged from this wood, passed along by some meadows, and reached the Junction Pool (so called from the Geinig and

Aivron meeting here) they found that the sun was much too bright; so they contentedly seated themselves on the bank, to wait for a cloud; while old Robert proceeded to consult his fly-book. Neither of them seemed in a very talkative mood; indeed, when you are in front of a Highland river, with its swift-glancing lights, its changing glooms and gleams, its continual murmur and prattle, what need is there of any talk? Talk only distracts the attention. And this part of the stream was especially beautiful. They could hardly quarrel with the sunlight when, underneath the clear water, it sent interlacing lines of gold chasing each other across the brown sand and shingle of the shallows; and if the cloudless sky overhead compelled this unwilling idleness, it also touched each of those dancing ripples with a gleam of most brilliant blue. Further out those scattered blue gleams became concentrated until they formed glassy sweeps of intensest azure, where the deep pools were; and these again gave way to the broken water under the opposite bank, where the swift-running current reflected the golden-green of the overhanging bushes and weeds. Where was the call for any speech between these two? When at length Robert admonished the young man to

get ready, because a cloud was coming over, and this part of the Aivron had to be waded, Lionel got up with no great good-will: that silent companionship, in the gracious stillness and soothing murmur of the stream, seemed to him to be more profitable to the soul than the lashing of a wide pool with a seventeen-foot rod.

But he buckled to his task, like a man; and as he could wade a good distance in, there was no need for him to attempt a long line. Surreptitiously, on many occasions, he had been getting lessons from old Robert; and now, if his casting was not professional in its length, it was at least clean. Moreover, by this time he had learnt that the expectant moment in salmon-fishing is not when the fly lights away over at the other side, and begins to sweep round in a semi-circle, but when it drags in the current before it is withdrawn; and he was in no haste in recovering.

"Why, Mr. Moore, you are casting beautifully," Miss Honnor Cunyngham called to him; and the words were sweet music to his ears; for it may be frankly admitted that this somewhat sensitive novice was playing to the gallery. His diligent and careful thrashing, however, was of no avail. He could not stir anything; and as in time the

deepening water drove him ashore, he willingly surrendered his rod to his fair companion, who could now fish from the bank.

Then he sat down to watch—and to dream. He could see that she was getting out more and more line, and throwing beautifully; but he had persuaded himself (or thought he had persuaded himself) into the belief that the singular and constant charm of this river had no association with her, or with the quiet hours these two had passed there together. It was the stream talking to him that had fascinated him, as he sate idly and listened. He had grown familiar with every cadence of that mysterious voice—now a whispering and laughing as the water danced over the sunny shallows—then a harsher note where the current, fretting and chafing, as it were, was broken by multitudes of stones—again a low murmur as the black river swept dark and sullen through a contracted channel—finally a fiercer tumult as this once placid Aivron, increasing in pace and volume every moment, flung itself lion-like over the masses of rocks—its tawny mane upheaved to the daylight—and then fell crashing and plunging into a mighty chasm, the birchwoods around reverberating with its angry roar. Far

away is the lonely sea. This friendly river may laugh or brawl as it will; but there is peace for it at last; its varying voices must eventually disappear in the dull, slow tumult of the distant world. And almost it seemed to him to complain as it went by—to appeal to him; and yet why to him, if he, too, was summoned away from this still solitude and sucked into a murmuring ocean still more awful than the sea?

"Well done, Miss Honnor!" old Robert called out.

Suddenly startled from his idle reverie, Lionel beheld the line being swiftly taken across to the other side of the river, sending up a little spurt of spray as it cleft the current.

"A good one this time, Robert, isn't it?" she cried.

"Ay, I'm thinking that's a good fish," old Robert made answer, as he rose from the bank and came down to her side.

"And there's a fair field and no favour," she continued. "Plenty of room for him—and he doesn't seem inclined to tug."

No, this was not a "jiggering" fish; but he was a pretty lively customer, for all that, as they were soon to find out. For after having rested for a

minute or so, he made a wild rush up-stream, still on the other side, and took a dangerous length of line out, and kept her running after him, and winding up when possible, as well as she was able. Further and further he went, until she had arrived at the junction of the Geinig and the Aivron, she being on the Geinig shore, and the fish making up the other stream. Here was a pleasant predicament!

"Mr. Moore," she called out, "take the rod and wade in!—I daren't give him more line—quick, quick, please!"

Her entreaty was quite pathetic in its earnestness; but old Robert was less excited.

"If Mr. Moore was not here, you would be in the watter yourself, Miss Honnor," the old man said, with a smile.

However, before the rod could be given into Lionel's hands, the salmon had changed his tactics. He came dashing across to the nearer side of the Aivron, so that the nose of land separating the two rivers threatened to come between the fish and his captor: there he lay still.

"Robert," she cried in despair, "if he goes another yard up stream, he will have the line on that bush! What is to be done?"

Almost at the same moment the fish began to move again—slowly this time—and with agonised anxiety they saw the line, despite all her efforts to keep it off, being quietly drawn into the small hazel-bush. But Robert knew that bush and its ways.

"Take the rod in, sir, as far as you can go," he said to Lionel; and then he himself ran round to a shallow ford of the Geinig, crossed over, went along the bank, and proceeded to get the line cautiously off the twigs and leaves. As soon as he had accomplished that, he stealthily withdrew, stooped down, and crept along the Aivron bank until he was a little ahead of the fish, which indeed was almost underneath his feet; then he suddenly raised himself to his full height, and threw up both arms. That was enough for the salmon. Away to the other side he rushed, leading down stream; and Lionel had now his work cut out for him, for he was standing in deep water, on a shelving bank of loose shingle, and he had to follow somehow, reeling in as best he might. But ever as he struggled after that obdurate unseen creature, he made for shallower water; and at length he reached dry land, and was glad to give the rod into Miss Honnor's hands again—the

fish, which had never once shown himself, being now almost opposite her, and in mid channel.

Well, they had a good deal of trouble with this salmon, for he did not exhaust himself with any further rushes, nor did he disport himself in the air; he simply lay low in the water, in a pretty strong current, and awaited events. But here in the open Miss Honnor had regained her confidence and usual composure; and in the end the continuous pressure of the pliant top was too much for him; he began to yield—fiercely fighting now and again to get away, to be sure; but the climax was a sudden flash of Robert's steel clip, and a heavy-shouldered fifteen-pounder was out on the stones. Old Robert, smiling grimly at the success of his young mistress, but saying nothing, had to "wet" the fish all by himself; for Miss Honnor's drink was water; and as for Lionel, his throat was too valuable and sensitive a possession to be treated to raw spirits at this time of the morning. Then, that ceremony being over, they deposited the salmon in a hole in the bank, to be picked up on their homeward journey, and forthwith set out again, up the valley of the Geinig.

Their surroundings were now becoming more wild and lonely—this, in fact, being the route by

which Lionel had travelled the day before when he was after the deer. Down in the glen, it is true, everything was pretty enough—the silver-grey rocks, the rushing brown water, the banks hanging with birches; but far away on those upland heights, there was nothing but the monotonous deep purple of the heather, broken here and there, perhaps, by a dark green pine; and beyond those heights again rose the rounded tops and shoulders of the distant cloud-stained hills. It was after Miss Honnor had industriously but unsuccessfully fished the Horse-Shoe and the Cormorant Pools that she chanced to be regarding the mountainous line along the sky; and she then perceived that one of those far shoulders was gradually changing from a sombre blue into a soft and pearly grey.

"Do you see the veil that has come over the high peak yonder?" she asked of her companion. "There is rain falling there; and most likely we shall have a shower or two here by and by; and as you have no waterproof, we may as well push on to a place of shelter where we can have our lunch. I know a pretty little dell up there, just above the Geinig Pool; and it will be quite a new sensation for me to have any one with me, for ordinarily I have my lunch there in solitary state, and I sit

and stare, and sit and stare, until I believe I know every stone in the burn and every spear of grass on the opposite bank."

Even as she spoke there was a slight pattering here in the sunlight, and diamonds began to glitter on the breckan. Then came a cold stirring of wind; there was a sensation of darkness overhead — of impending gloom — of hushed expectancy; finally, just as they reached the little glade, descended into it, crossed the burn, and took refuge beneath some overhanging birch-trees, the heavy rattle of the deluge was heard all around them, and they were glad enough to be under this canopy of trembling leaves. It was only a sharp shower, after all. That universal whirr grew fainter; the air became warmer; a kind of watery glow begun to show itself in the sky; presently, as they ventured to look up through the dripping pendulous branches, there was a glimpse of heavenly blue above them: behold, the rain was over and gone!

Then carefully did the handsome old gillie spread out her waterproof on the sloping bank for Miss Honnor to sit on; he brought forth the little parcels neatly tied up in white paper; likewise a bottle of milk and two silver drinking-cups; when

he had seen that she was all properly cared for, he handed to Lionel the game-bag which had held the luncheon, so that that might serve as the other seat, if he chose; and then the old man withdrew a few yards down the little hollow, to be within call if he was wanted.

And what had Lionel to say for himself, now that he had been admitted into this secret haunt of the river-maiden? Well, if the truth must be told, he was considerably embarrassed. For one thing, he was mortally afraid that she might suddenly bethink herself of Paul and Virginia, and be annoyed by a situation which was certainly none of his contriving. What was still worse, she might be amused! He could not get it out of his head that there was something dangerously, almost ludicrously, conventional in the whole position; it seemed to suggest some foolish, old-fashioned, sentimental picture. The solitary dell, and the two figures: why, he felt as if blue ribbons were beginning to sprout at his knees; and he feared to turn to his companion lest he should find her with a crook and a kirtle. He did not ask himself why wretched reminiscences of theatrical tradition should thrust themselves upon him here in the lonely wilds of Ross-shire: what he dreaded was

that some such idea might occur to her, and provoke her resentment—what was still more ghastly, it might make her laugh!

Honnor Cunyngham, for her part, was quietly and contentedly munching her sandwiches of salmon and vinegared lettuce-leaf; and no such idle town-fancies were troubling her. Probably she was thinking that the hot sunlight after the shower made everything intensely vivid—the silver-stemmed birches in this picturesque little dell rising gracefully into the keen blue of the sky; the diamond-starred breckans and grass shining after the wet; the clear tea-brown water at her feet glancing in the sun; the green and bronze stones and pebbles showing clear at the bottom of the pellucid brook as it chased and danced on its way down to the Geinig. And whatever else she may have been thinking of, she was almost certainly conscious that vinegared lettuce-leaf in a sandwich was a vast improvement.

"Do you come here often?" he said, at length.

"It is my favourite nook," she made answer.

"I confess that I feel horribly like an interloper," he remarked, hesitatingly. "I feel as if I—as if I had no right to be here—as if I was invading a sacred retreat—" and there he stopped;

for he would like to have added "the sacred retreat of a sylvan Goddess or a Nymph of the Stream," but that he somehow felt that fantastic imagery of that kind would hardly be appropriate.

"You had more need of the shelter than I," said this extremely matter-of-fact young person, "for you had no waterproof, and I had. Come, if you have finished, shall we go up to the Top Pool?—I want you to have a cast over that, for it is an experience; and though the sun is out, it won't much matter; there is always such a boiling and surging in that caldron."

Old Robert, whose head was just visible above the bracken, was thereupon called to pack up the remains of the simple feast, and then they set forth again—skirting, but not troubling the Geinig Pool, for the sun was too strong. A beautiful pool was this Geinig Pool—the water coming tumbling down over the boulders in masses of chestnut-hue and white, then sailing away in a rapid sweep of purplish-blue, and then breaking over shallows (whose every ripple was flashing a diamond point) as it went whirling into the rocky channel beyond. The sun lay hot on the steep banks, where not a leaf of the birch-trees stirred now, and on the lichened rocks, and on the long

strand of lilac-grey pebbles; altogether a beautiful pool this was, set deep in its cup among the hills, but for their present purposes useless.

The Top Pool, which they presently reached, was altogether a different sort of place; for here the waters plunged into a roaring caldron with a din that stunned the ears; and now it was that Lionel discovered Miss Honnor's intention—he was to have the amusement of throwing a fly over this Maelström from the side of the sheer bank, while the only foothold afforded him was the stump of an out-projecting pine. Well, he was not going to refuse—and ask a young lady to take his place. He dug his feet into the soft herbage about the roots of the tree; old Robert handed him the rod; he got out some line; and then began to try how he could get a fly down into that raging vortex, while keeping clear of the branches over his head. His first impression was that he might as well attempt to throw a fly to the moon; but presently things began to look more hopeful; and he found at length that, when the fly did get just beyond the downward rush of the fall, it was swept by the current into certain glassy deeps, where he could work it pretty well. Hard as he laboured, however, that jerking

little grey shrimp (for that was what the fly looked like in the water) could not stir anything. He worked away until even the indefatigable Robert said he had done enough; then he reeled up; and perhaps he was not sorry to regain the top of this sheer precipice, where there was but that single fir-stump and a few loose branches of birch between him and the seething and surging whirlpool below.

He was more fortunate in the Geinig Pool, which Miss Cunyngham also compelled him to take, good-naturedly remarking that she had her fish already, and that he must have its fellow to carry home in the evening. There were some welcome clouds about now; and the rock from which he had to cast over the Geinig Pool afforded him a much better foothold than the fir-roots. At first things did not seem favourable; for he went over all the deep smooth water without moving a fin; in fact, he had fished almost right to the end of the pool, when, in the very act of recovering his line, he got hold of something. And very soon he found that he had got hold of a very lively something; for the cantrips which this small salmon played were most extraordinary. For a second or two he seemed inclined to go

right down the stony channel (which would have instantly settled the matter, as there was no possible means of following him) but the next moment he had dashed right up through the middle of the pool, tearing the water as he went, and frightening the luckless fisherman half out of his wits with this dangerously slackening line. That, however, was soon righted; and now the salmon lay in an eddy just below the fall. Would he attempt to breast that bulk of water in a mad effort to be free of this hateful thing that had got hold of him?—then good-bye to him for ever! But no—that was not his fancy: he suddenly sprung into the air—and again sprung—and then savagely beat the surface with body and tail; after which fearsome performance he swerved round and came right in under the rock on which Lionel was standing, where they could see him lying perfectly still in the deep clear water. He neither tugged nor bored; that olive-green thing (for so he appeared in these depths) lay perfectly motionless—no doubt planning further devilment, and only waiting to recover his strength. Meanwhile Lionel had scrambled a bit higher up the rock so as to get the rod at a safer angle.

"He's a lively fellow, that one!" old Robert

said, with a grin. "Ay, sir, and ye hooked him ferry well too."

"I should say I did!" Lionel exclaimed. "I had no idea there was a fish there—I never saw him coming—I was drawing the line out of the water, and all at once thought I had struck on a log. He's well hooked, I should think; but I didn't hook him—he hooked himself."

"He's not a ferry big one, but he's a salmon whatever," old Robert said; and then he suddenly called out, "Mind, sir!—let him go!—let him go!"

For away went that little wretch again, tearing over to the other side, where he lashed and better lashed the surface; and then, getting tired of that exercise, he somewhat sullenly came sailing into mid-stream, where there was a smooth, dark current, bounded on the side next the fisherman by some brown shelves of rock only a few inches under water. And what must this demon of a fish do but begin boring into the stream, so that every moment the line was being drawn nearer and nearer to the knife-like edge.

"Here, Robert, what am I to do now!" Lionel cried in dismay. "Another couple of inches, and it's all over! How are we to get him out of that hole?"

"Mebbe he'll no go mich deeper," Robert observed, calmly—but with his grey eyes keenly watching.

"If I lose this fish," Lionel said, between his teeth, "I'll throw myself into the pool after him!"

"You'd better not," said Miss Cunyngham, placidly, "for if Robert has to gaff you, you'll find it a very painful experience."

But now the line was slackening a little; the fisherman reeled in quickly; the salmon made his appearance — undoubtedly yielding; and then, coming over the shallow rocks in obedience to the pressure of the rod, he once more sailed into the black clear pool just below them. Cautiously old Robert crept down. When he was close to the water, he bared his right arm, and grasped the gaff by the handle; then he waited and watched—for the salmon was still too deep. Lionel, meanwhile, had got back a bit on the rock, so that any sudden rush might not snap the top of his rod in two; then he also waited and watched—but somewhat increasing the pressure on the fish. Miss Honnor was probably as interested as either of them; but she only said—

"I think he is well hooked—and you'll get him—but don't bear too hardly on him for all that."

The conclusion of the fight proved to be a series of rapid and cautious skirmishes between the salmon and old Robert; for as soon as the former discovered that danger awaited him at the foot of the rock, he made every possible effort to break away, and then, getting more and more exhausted, allowed himself to be led in again. And then at last, on his sailing in almost on his side, so dead beat was he, a firm stroke of the gaff caught him behind the shoulder, and the next moment he was in mid-air, the next again on the bare rock.

Now when you have slain a stag one day, it is not so much of a triumph to kill a salmon the next; nevertheless, Lionel was as heartily glad to see that fish ashore as he would have been deeply mortified had it escaped. For was not Honnor Cunyngham looking on? Nay, she was kind enough to say to him—

"You played that fish very well, Mr. Moore."

"I have been watching you so often," said he, modestly, "that I must have learned something. And now you must take all the pools on the way home. I won't touch the rod again unless when wading is absolutely necessary. You see, I have no right to this salmon at all; I consider you have made me a present of him."

"We must try and get another somehow, between us, before getting back to the lodge," said she; and this unconscious coupling of themselves as companions sounded pleasant to his ears.

Moreover, as old Robert had now the fish to carry, Lionel, as usual, made bold to claim Miss Honnor's waterproof, which he slung over his arm; and that also was a privilege he greatly enjoyed. Indeed, his satisfaction as they now proceeded to walk along to the Horse-Shoe Pool was but natural in the circumstances. This charming companionship secured all to himself—the capture of the salmon—the tribute that had been paid to his skill—the magnetic waterproof hanging over his arm—the prospect of a long ramble home on this beautiful afternoon: all these things combined were surely sufficient to put any young man in an excellent humour. And there was something more in store for him.

"Do you know," he was saying, as they walked along together, "that I have grown quite used to the solitariness of this neighbourhood? I don't find it strange, or melancholy, or oppressive any longer. I suppose when I get back to a crowded city, the roar of it will be absolutely bewildering; indeed, I am looking forward with a good deal of

interest to seeing something of the world again at Kilfearn—which can't be a very big place either."

"Oh, are you going to the opening of the Kilfearn Town Hall?" she asked.

"Yes," said he, with a little surprise, "I thought everybody was going. Aren't you? I understood the whole world—of Ross-shire—was to be there; and that I was to make a sudden plunge into a perfect whirlpool of human life."

"It will amuse you," she said, with a quiet smile. "You will see all the county families there, staring at each other's guests; and you will hear a lot of songs like 'My Pretty Jane,' and 'Ever of Thee' sung by bashful young ladies. At the opening of the proceedings my brother Hugh will make a speech; he is their chairman; and I know precisely what he will say. Hugh always speaks to the point. It will be something like this—'Ladies and gentlemen, I am glad to see you here to-night. We still want 180*l*. We mean to give two more concerts to clear the debt right off. You must all come, and bring your friends. I will not longer stand in the way of the performers who have kindly volunteered their services.'"

"And that is a most admirable speech," her companion exclaimed. "It says everything that

is wanted, and nothing more: I call it a model speech!"

"Mr. Moore," she said, suddenly looking up, "are you going to sing at the concert?"

"I believe so," he answered.

"What are you going to sing?"

"Oh, I don't know yet. Whatever I am asked for. Lady Adela is arranging the programme." And then he added rather breathlessly: "Is there anything you would care to have me sing?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," said she, quite frankly, "I hardly intended going. But if I thought there was a chance of hearing you sing some such song as 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray,' I would go."

"'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray'?" he said, eagerly. "The song that Miss Lestrange sang the other night?"

"The song that Miss Lestrange made a fool of the other night," she said, contemptuously. "But if you were to sing it, you would make it very fine and impressive—I should like to hear you sing that in a large hall—"

"Oh, but certainly I will sing it!" he said, quickly, for he was only too rejoiced that she should prefer this small request, as showing that

she did take some little interest in him and what he could do. "I will make a stipulation that I sing it, if I sing anything. Miss Lestrange won't mind, I know."

"I almost think you should go under an assumed name," Miss Honnor said, presently, with a bit of a laugh. "I dare say the people wouldn't recognise you, in ordinary dress. And then, when the amateur vocalists had been going on with their Pretty Janes and Meet me by Moonlights, when you gave them 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray,' as you would sing it, I should think amazement would be on most faces. But I dare say Lady Adela has had it announced in the *Inverness Courier* that you are to sing, for they want to make a grand success of the concert, to help to clear off the debt; and of course all the people from the shooting-lodges will be coming, for it isn't every autumn they have a chance of hearing Mr. Lionel Moore in Ross-shire."

Really, she was becoming quite complaisant!—this proud, unapproachable huntress-maiden, who seemed to live remote and isolated in a world all of her own. And so she was coming to this amateur concert, merely to hear him sing? Be sure the first thing he did that evening, on entering the drawing-room after dinner, was to go up to Miss

Georgie Lestrange with a humble little speech, asking her whether she would object to his borrowing that particular ballad from her repertory. The smiling and gracious young damsel instantly replied that, on the contrary, she would be delighted to play the accompaniment for him. Would he look at the music now? He did look at it; found it simple enough; imagined that the refrain verse might be made rather effective. Would he try it over now? Yes, if she would be so kind. She forthwith went to the piano, he following; and at once there was silence in the long, low-ceilinged drawing-room. Of course this was but a trial; and the room had not been constructed with a view to any acoustic requirements; nevertheless the fine and penetrating *timbre* of his trained voice told all the same; indeed, it is probable there was a lump in the throat of more than one of those young ladies when he sang the pathetic refrain, with its proud and sonorous finish—

> '*O lang, lang may his Lady*
> *Look frae the Castle Doune,*
> *Ere she see the Earl o' Moray*
> COME SOUNDING THROUGH THE TOUN.'

Simple as the air was, it haunted the ear even of this professional vocalist all the evening; but per-

haps that was because he was looking forward to a coming occasion on which he would have to sing the ballad; and well he knew that however numerous his audience might be—though he might be standing before all the Rosses and Frasers, the Gordens and Munroes, the Mackays and Mackenzies of the county—well he knew that he would be singing—that he intended to sing—to an audience of one only. And which would she like to have emphasised the more—the pathetic and hopeless outlook of the lady in the tower, or the proud state and ceremony of the Earl himself as he used to 'come sounding through the toun'? Well, he would practise a little, and ascertain what he could do with it—on some occasion when he found himself alone away up in the hills, with a silence around him unbroken save for the hushed whisper of the birch-leaves, and the distant, low murmur of the Geinig falls.

CHAPTER II.

THE PHANTOM STAG.

But if he were so anxious about how he should sing (for his audience of one only) that old Scotch ballad, he was not acting very wisely, or else he had a sublime confidence in the soundness of his chest; for on his host's offering him another day's stalking, he cheerfully accepted the same; and that notwithstanding they had now fallen upon a period of extremely rough, cold, and wet weather. Was this another piece of bravado, then—undertaken to produce a favourable impression in a certain quarter—or had the hunter's hunger really got hold of him? On the evening before the appointed raid, even the foresters looked glum; the western hills were ominous and angry; and the wind that came howling down the strath seemed to foretell a storm. But he was not to be daunted; he said he would give up only when Roderick

assured him that the expedition was quite impracticable and useless.

"I hear you are going after the deer to-morrow," said the pretty Miss Georgie Lestrange to him, in the drawing-room after dinner, while Lady Sybil was performing her famous fantasia 'The Voices of the Moonlight,' to which nobody listened but her own admiring self. "And I was told all about that custom of making the stalker a little present on his setting out, for good luck. It was Honnor Cunyngham who did that for you last time; and I think it should be my turn to-morrow morning."

"Oh, thank you!" said he; but 'Thank you for nothing!' he said in his heart; for why should any frivolous trinket—even when presented by this very charming and complaisant young damsel—be allowed to interfere with the prerogative of Miss Cunyngham's sacred talisman?

"I say," continued the bright-eyed, ruddy-haired lass, "what do you and Honnor Cunyngham talk about all day long, when you are away on those fishing excursions? Don't you bore each other to death? Oh, I know she's rather learned; though she doesn't bestow much of her knowledge upon us. Well, I'm not going to say anything against Honnor; for she's so awfully good-natured; you

know, she allows her sisters-in-law to experiment on her as an audience, and she has always something friendly and nice to say, though I can guess what she thinks of it all. Now, what *do* you two talk about all day long?"

"Well, there's the fishing," said he, "for one thing."

"Oh, don't tell me!" exclaimed this impertinent young hussy (while the Voices of the Moonlight moaned and mourned their mysterious regrets and despairs at the far end of the drawing-room). "Don't tell *me!* Honnor Cunyngham is far too good-looking for you to go talking salmon to her all day long. Very handsome, I call her: don't you? She's so distinguished, somehow—so different from any one else. Of course you don't notice it up here so much, where she prides herself on roughing it—you never met her in London?—in London you should see her come into a drawing-room—her walk and manner are simply splendid. She'll never marry," continued this garrulous little person with the coquettish pince-nez perched on her not too Grecian nose. "I'm sure she won't. She despises men—all of them except her brother, Sir Hugh. Lord Rockminster admires her tremendously; but he's too lazy to say so, I

suppose. How has she taken such a fancy to you?"

"I was not aware she had," Lionel discreetly made answer, though the question had startled him, and not with pain.

"Oh, yes, she has. Did she think you were lone and unprotected, being persecuted by the rest of us? I am quite certain she wouldn't allow my brother Percy to go fishing a whole day with her; most likely Lord Rockminster wouldn't care to take the trouble. I wonder if she hasn't a bit of a temper? Lady Rosamund is awful sometimes; but she doesn't show that to *you*—catch her! But Honnor Cunyngham—well, the only time I ever went with her on one of her storking exhibitions, the water was low, and she thrashed away for hours, and saw nothing. At last a stot happened to come wandering along; and she said quite savagely 'I'm going to hook something!' You don't know what a stot is?—it's a young bullock. So she deliberately walked to within twenty yards or so of the animal, threw the line so that it just dropped across its neck, and the fly caught in the thick hair. You should have seen the gay performance that followed! The beast shook its head and shook its head—for it could feel the line, if it

couldn't feel the fly; and then getting alarmed, it started off up the hill, with the reel squealing just as if a salmon was on, and Honnor running after him as hard as she could over the bracken and heather. If it was rage made her hook the stot, she was laughing now—laughing so that when the beast stopped she could hardly reel in the line. And old Robert—I thought he would have had a fit. 'Will I gaff him now, Miss Honnor?' he cried, as he came running along. But the stot didn't mean to be gaffed. Off it set again; and Honnor after it, until at last it caught the line in a birch-bush and broke it; then, just as if nothing had happened, it began to graze as usual. You should have seen the game that began then—old Robert and Honnor trying to get hold of the stot, so as to take the casting-line and the fly from its mane—it isn't a mane, but you know—and the stot trying to butt them whenever they came near. The end of it was that the beast shook off the fly for itself, and old Robert found it; but I wonder whether it was real rage that made Honnor Cunyngham hook the stot——"

"Of course not!" he said. "It was a mere piece of fun."

"It isn't fun when Lady Rosamund comes down-

stairs in a bad temper—after you gentlemen have left," remarked Miss Georgie, significantly; and then she prattled away in this careful undertone. "What horrid stuff that fantasia is: don't you think so? A mixture of Wagner, and Chopin, and 'Home, sweet home.' Lady Adela has put you in her novel. Oh, yes, she has; she showed me the last pages this morning. You remember the young married English lady who is a great poetess?—well, she is rescued from drowning in the Bay of Syracuse by a young Greek sailor, and you are the Greek sailor. You'll be flattered by her description of you. You are entirely Greek and god-like—what is that bust?—Alcibiades?—no, no, he was a general, wasn't he?—Alcinous, is it?—or Antinous?—never mind, the bust you see so often in Florence and Rome—well, you're described as being like that; and the young English lady becomes your patron, and you're to be educated, and brought to London. But whether her husband is to be killed off, to make way for you; or whether she is going to hand you over to one of her sisters, I don't know yet. It must be rather nice to look at yourself in a novel, and see what other people think of you, and what fate they ordain for you. Lady Adela has got all the

criticisms of her last novel—all the nice ones, I mean—cut out, and pasted on pages, and bound in scarlet morocco. I told her she should have all the unpleasant ones cut out and bound in green—envy and jealousy, don't you see?—but she pretends not to have seen any besides those she has kept. The book is in her own room; I suppose she reads it over every night, before going to bed. And really, after so much praise, it is extraordinary that she is to have no money for the book—no, quite the reverse, I believe. She was looking forward to making Sir Hugh a very handsome present—all out of her own earnings, don't you know; and she wrote to the publishers; but instead of Sir Hugh getting a present, he will have to give her a cheque to cover the deficit, poor man. Disappointing, isn't it?—quite horrid, I call it; and every one thought the novel such a success—your friend, Mr. Quirk, was most enthusiastic—and we made sure that the public would be equally impressed. It isn't the loss of the money that Lady Adela frets about; it is the publishers telling her that so few copies have been sold; and we made sure, from all that was said in the papers—especially those that Mr. Quirk was kind enough to send—that the book was going to be read every-

where. Mind you don't say anything of the young Greek sailor until Lady Adela herself shows you the MS.; and of course you mustn't recognise your own portrait; for that is merely a guess of mine. Oh, thank you, thank you!"

The last words were a murmur of gratitude to Lady Sylvia Bourne for her kindness in playing this piece of her own composition; and thereafter Miss Georgie's engaging and instructive monologue was not resumed; for the evening was now about to be wound up by a round or two of poker, and at poker Miss Georgie was an eager adept.

All that night it poured a deluge; and the morning beheld the Aivron in roaring spate; the familiar landmarks of the banks having mostly disappeared, and also many of the mid-channel rocks; while the blue-black current that came whirling down the strath seemed to bring with it the dull, constant thunder of the distant falls. The western hills looked wild and stormy; there was half-a-gale of wind tearing along the valley; and if the torrents of the night had mitigated, there were still flying showers of rain that promised to make of the expedition anything but a pleasure excursion.

"Tell me if it is any use at all!" Lionel insisted,

for it must be confessed that the keepers looked very doubtful.

"Well, sir," said the bushy-bearded Roderick, "the deer will be down from the hills—oh, yes—but they'll be restless and moving about——"

"Do you expect I shall have a chance at one—that's all I want to know," was the next demand.

"Oh, yes, there may be that; but you'll get ahfu wet, sir—"

"I'm going," said he, definitely; whereupon the pony was straightway brought up to the door.

And here was Miss Georgie Lestrange, in a charming morning costume which the male pen may not adequately describe; and she held a small packet in her hands.

"I told Honnor Cunyngham it was my turn," she said, with a kind of bashful smile, as she handed the little present to him, "and she only laughed—I wonder if she thinks she can command all the luck in Ross-shire: has she got a monopoly of it? Well, Mr. Moore, they all say you'll get fearfully wet; and that is a silk handkerchief you must put round your neck: what would the English public say if you went back from the Highlands with a hoarse throat!"

"I'm not thinking of the English public just at present," said he, cheerfully. "I'm thinking of the stag that is wandering about somewhere up in the hills; and I am certain your good wishes will get me a shot at him. How kind of you to get up so early!—good-bye!"

This, it must be admitted, was a most hypocritical speech; for although, as he rode away, he made a pretence of tying the pale pink neckerchief round his throat, it was on the influence of Miss Cunyngham's lucky sixpence—the pierced coin was secretly attached to his watch-chain—that he relied. In fact, before he had gone far from the lodge, he removed that babyish protection against the rain, and stuck it in his pocket; he was not going to throw out a red flag to warn the deer.

After all, the morning was not quite so dismal as had been threatened; for now and again, as they went away up the strath, there was a break in the heavy skies; and then the river shone a deep and brilliant purple-blue—save where it came hurling in ale-hued masses over the rocks, or rushed in surging white foam through the stony channels. Sometimes a swift glimmer of sunlight smote down on the swinging current; but these

flashes were brief; for the lowering clouds were still being driven over from the west; and no one could tell what the day would bring forth.

"What will Miss Honnor do in a spate like that?" Lionel inquired of the head-keeper. "Will she go out at all?"

"Oh, ay, Miss Honnor will go out," Roderick made answer; "but she will only be able to fish the tail-end o' the pools—ay, and it will not be easy to put a fly over the water, unless the wind goes down a bit."

"But do you mean she will go out on a day like this?" he demanded again—as he looked at the wild skies and the thundering river.

"Oh, ay, if there's a chance at ahl Miss Honnor will be out," said Roderick, and he added, with a demure smile, "even if the chentlemen will be for staying at home."

However, Lionel had soon to consider his own attitude towards this swollen stream, when it became necessary to ford it on the hither side of the Bad Step. To tell the truth, when he regarded that racing current, he did not like the look of it at all.

"I don't see how we are to get across," he said, with some hesitation.

"Maggie knaws the weh," Roderick made answer, with a bit of a laugh.

"Yes, that's all very well," said the mounted huntsman. "I dare say she knows the way; but if she gets knocked over in the middle of the current, what is to become of me, or of her either?"

"She'll manage it, sir," said the keeper, confidently, "never fear."

Lionel was just on the point of saying, "Well, you come yourself and ride her across; and I'll go over the Bad Step on foot;" but he did not like to show the white feather; so, somewhat apprehensively, he turned the old pony's head to the river-bank. And very soon he found that old Maggie knew much better what she was about than he did; for, as soon as she felt the weight of the water, she did not attempt to go straight across; she deliberately turned her head down-stream, put her buttocks against the force of the current, and thus side-ways, and very cautiously, and with many a thrilling stumble and catching up again, she proceeded to forge this whirling Aivron. Never once did she expose herself broad-side; her hind legs were really doing most of the fight; and right gratefully did Lionel clap the neck of this wise beast when he found himself on

solid land. The ford further up was much less dangerous; and so once again the reunited party held on its way.

Then here was the Geinig—no longer the pretty and picturesque river that he knew, but a boiling and surging torrent sweeping in red wrath down its narrow and rocky channel. The farther heights, too, that now came into view, had lost their wonted pale and ethereal hues: there were no soft cloud-stains on the purple slopes of heather—a darkness dwelt over the land. As he gradually got up into that wilder country, the gloom grew more intense, the desolation more awful. The roar of the Geinig was lost now in this dreadful silence. He seemed to have left behind him all human sympathies and associations—to have forsaken his kindred and his kind—to have entered a strange world peopled only with dark phantoms and moving shadows and ghosts. A voiceless solitude, too, save for the moaning of the wind, that came sweeping in bitter blasts down from the rainy hills. He did not recognise the features of this melancholy landscape; they had all changed since his last visit; nay, they were changing under his very eyes, as this or that far mountain-top receded behind a veil of grey, or a

shadow of greater darkness advanced with stealthy tread along one of those lonely glens. There was something threatening in the aspect of both earth and sky; something louring, conspiring, as if some dread fate were awaiting this intruding stranger; at times he fancied he could hear low-murmuring voices, the first mutterings of distant thunder. What if some red bolt of lightning were suddenly to sever this blackness in twain, and reveal its hidden and awful secrets? But no; there was no such friendly, or avenging, glare; the brooding skies lay over the sombre valleys; and the gloomy phantasmagoria slowly changed and changed in that unearthly twilight, as the mists and the wind and the rain transformed the solid hills and the straths into intermingling vapours and visions. A spectral world, unreal, and yet terrible; apparently voiceless and tenantless; and yet somehow suggesting that there were eyes watching, and vaguely moving and menacing shapes passing hither and thither before him in the gloom.

During these last few days he had been assuring himself that he would enter upon this second stalking expedition without any great tremor. It was only on the first occasion, when everything was strange and unknown to him, that he was naturally

nervous. Even the keepers had declared that the shooting of the first stag was everything; that thereafter he would have confidence; that he would take the whole matter as coolly as themselves. And yet when they now began to proceed more warily (old Maggie having been hobbled some way back) and when every corrie and slope and plateau had to be searched with the glass, he found himself growing not a little anxious at the thought of drawing the trigger; insomuch, indeed, that those sombre fancies of the imagination went out of his head altogether, and gave place to the apprehension that on such a day it would be impossible to make a good shot. Their initial difficulty, however, was to find any trace of the "beasts." The wild weather had most likely driven them away from their usual haunts into some place of shelter, the smaller companies joining the main herd; at all events, up to lunch-time the stalkers had seen nothing. It was during this brief rest—in a deep peat-hag, down which trickled a little stream of rain-water—that Lionel discovered two things: first, that he was wet to the skin, and, second, that the wind in these altitudes was of an Arctic keenness. So long as he had been kept going, he had not paid much attention; but

now this bitter blast seemed to pierce him to the very marrow; and he began to think that these were very pleasant conditions for a professional singer to be in—for a professional singer whose very existence depended on his voice.

"Here goes for congestion of the lungs," he philosophically observed to himself, as he shiveringly munched his wet sandwiches.

Presently Roderick came along the peat-hag.

"Would you like to wait here, sir, for a while?" said he in his accustomed undertone. "I'm thinking Alec and me will go aweh up to the top of Meall-Breac and hef a look round there; and if we are seeing nothing, we will come back this weh, and go down the Corrie-nam-Miseag——"

"And I am to wait here for you?" Lionel exclaimed. "Not if I know it! By the time you come back, Roderick, you would find me a frozen corpse. I've got to keep moving somehow, and I may as well go on with you. I suppose I cannot have a cigarette before setting out?"

"Aw naw, sir!" Roderick pleaded. "In this weather, you cannot say where the deer may be—you may happen on them at any moment—and there will be plenty of time for you to smok on the weh hom."

"Very well," Lionel said; and he got up and tried to shake his blood into freer circulation; then he set out with his two companions for the summit of Meall-Breac.

This steep ascent was fatiguing enough; but at all events it restored some warmth to his body. He did not go quite to the top; he sate down on a lichened stone while Roderick proceeded to crawl inch by inch until his head and glass were just over the crest of a certain knoll. A long scrutiny followed; then the forester slowly disappeared—the gillie following in his serpent-like track; and Lionel sate on in apathetic patience, slowly getting chilled again. He asked himself what Nina would say to him if she knew of these escapades. He held his back to the wind until he was frozen that way; then he turned his face to the chill blast, folding his arms across his chest. He took a sip from Percy Lestrange's flask; but that was more for employment than anything else; for he discovered there was no real warmth to be got that way. He thought Roderick was never coming back from the top of the hill. He would have started off down the ascent again, but that they might miss him; besides, he might do something fatally wrong. So he sate on this cold stone

and shivered; and began to think of Kensal Green.

Suddenly he heard footsteps behind him; he turned and found the two men coming towards him.

"Not a sign of anything, sir," was Roderick's report. "It's awfu' dark and difficult to see; and the clouds are down all along Glen Bhoideach. We'll just step along by the Corrie-nam-Miseag. They very often stop for a while in the corrie when they're crossing over to Achnadruim."

Lionel was not sorry to be again in motion; and yet very soon he found that motion was not an unmixed joy; for these two fellows, who were now going down wind along the route they had come, and therefore walking fearlessly, took enormously long strides, and held straight on, no matter what sort of ground they were covering. For the sake of his country, he fought hard to keep up with them; he would not have them say they could outwalk an Englishman—and an Englishman considerably younger than either of them; but the way those two went over this rough and broken land was most extraordinary. And it seemed so easy; they did not appear to be putting forth any exertion; in spite of all he could do, he

began to lag a little; and so he thought he would mitigate their ardour by engaging them in a little conversation.

"Roderick," said he, "do you think this neighbourhood was ever inhabited?"

"Inhabited?" said Roderick, turning in surprise. "Oh, ay, it was inhabited ahlways—by foxes and eagles."

"Not by human beings?"

"Well, they would be ferry clever that could get a living out of land like this," Roderick said, simply.

"But they say in the House of Commons that the deer-forests are depriving a large portion of the population of a means of subsistence," Lionel observed—rather breathlessly, for these long strides were fearful.

"Ay, do they say that now?" Roderick made answer, with much simplicity. "In the House of Commons? I'm thinking there is some foolish men in the House of Commons. Mebbe they would not like themselves to come here and try to get their living out of rocks and peat-hags."

"But don't you think there may have been people in these parts, before the ancient forests rotted down into peat?" Lionel again inquired.

"I do not know about that," Roderick said, discreetly: perhaps he knew that his opinions about prehistoric man were not of great value.

But what Lionel discovered was that talking in nowise interfered with the tremendous pace of the forester; and he was just on the point of begging for a respite from this intolerable exertion when a change in their direction caused both Roderick and the gillie to proceed more circumspectly: they were now coming in view of the Corrie-nam-Miseag, and they had to approach with care, slinking along through hollows and behind mounds and rocks.

By this time, it must be confessed, Lionel was thoroughly dead-beat: he was wet through, icily cold, and miserable to the verge of despair. The afternoon was well advanced; they had seen no sign of a stag anywhere; the gloomy evening threatened to bring darkness on prematurely; and but for very shame's sake, he would have entreated them to abandon this fruitless enterprise, and set out for the far-off region of warmth, and reasonable comfort, and dry clothes. And yet when Roderick, having crawled up to the top of a small height, suddenly and eagerly signalled for Lionel to follow him, all this hopeless lassitude was

instantly forgotten. His heart began to burn, if his limbs were deadly cold; and quickly he was on the ground, too, moving himself alongside the keeper. The glass was given him, but his trembling fingers could not hold it straight; he put it down, and by and by his natural eyes showed him what he thought were some slightly moving objects.

"There's two of them—two stags," Roderick whispered, "and we can get at them easily if there's no more wandering about that I cannot see. Mebbe the others are over that hill. There's one of them is a fine big beast, but he has only the one horn; the other one, his head is not ferry good. But a stag is a stag whatever; and the evening is wearing on. Now come aweh with me, sir."

What Roderick meant by getting at them easily Lionel was now to find out; he thought he would never have done with this agonising stooping, and crawling, and wading through burns. Long before they had got to the neighbourhood of the deer, he wished heartily that the night would come suddenly down, or the stags take the alarm and make off—anything so that he might be released from this unspeakable toil and suffering. And yet he held

on, in a sort of blind, despairing fashion: the idea in his head being that if nature gave way he would simply lie down and fall asleep in the heather—whether to wake again or not he hardly cared. But by and by he was to have his reward. Roderick was making for a certain cluster of rocks; and when these were reached, Lionel found, to his inexpressible joy, not only that he was allowed to stand upright, but that the stalk had been accomplished. By peering over one of the boulders, he could see both stags quietly feeding at something like seventy yards' distance. It was going to be an easy shot in every way: himself in ample concealment; a rock on which to rest his rifle; the deer without thought of danger. He would take his time, and calm down his nerves.

"Which one?" he whispered to Roderick.

"The one with the one horn is a fine beast," the keeper whispered in return; "and the other one, his head is worth nothing at all."

With extremest caution Lionel put the muzzle over the ledge of the rock, and pushed it quietly forward. He made sure of his footing. He got hold of the barrel with his left hand, and of the stock with his right; he fixed the rifle firmly against his shoulder; and took slow and steady

aim. He was not so nervous this time; indeed, everything was in his favour: the stag standing broadside on, and hardly moving; and this rock offering so convenient a rest. He held his breath for a moment—concentrated all his attention on the long, smooth barrel—and fired.

"You've got him, sir!" exclaimed Roderick in an eager whisper, and still keeping his head down; but seeing that the other stag had caught sight of the rifle-smoke and was off at the top of his speed, he rose from his place of concealment, and jumped on to the rock that had been hiding him.

"Ay, ay, sir, he'll no go far," he cried to Lionel, who was scrambling up to the same place. "There, he's down again on his knees. Come aweh, sir; we'll go after him. Give me the rifle."

Lionel had just time to get a glimpse of the wounded stag, which was stumbling pitifully along—far behind its now disappearing companion—when he had to descend from the rock in order to follow Roderick. All three ran quickly down the hill and rounded into the hollow where they had last seen the stag, following up his track, and looking out everywhere for his prostrate body. But the further they went, the more amazed

became Roderick and the gillie: there was no sign of the beast that both of them declared could not have run a couple of hundred yards. The track of him disappeared in the bed of a burn, and could not be recovered, search as they would; so they proceeded to explore every adjacent hollow and peat-hag, in the certainty that within a very few minutes they must find the lost quarry. The few minutes lengthened out and out; half-hours went by; and yet there was no sign. They went away down the burn; they went away up the burn; they made wider casts, and narrowed in, like so many retrievers; and all to no purpose. And meanwhile darkness and the night were coming on.

"He's lying dead somewhere, as sure as anything can be," Roderick said, looking entirely puzzled and crest-fallen; "and we'll hef to bring up a terrier in the morning, and search for him. I never sah the like o' that in my life. When he fell where he stood I made sure he was feenished; then he was up again, and ran a little weh, and again he went down on his knees——"

"It was then I saw him," Lionel exclaimed, "and I expected him to drop the next moment. Why, he *must* be about here, Roderick, he couldn't vanish into the air—he wasn't a ghost—for I

heard the thud of the bullet when it struck him——"

"Ay, and me too," Roderick said, "but we will do no good now, for it is getting so dark; and you hef to cross the two fords, sir——"

"The fords!" said Lionel. "By Jove, I forgot them. I say, we must hurry on. I suppose you are sure to find him in the morning?"

"We will bring up a terrier whatever," Roderick said doubtfully; for he seemed to have been entirely disconcerted by the disappearance of the phantom stag. "Ay, I hef known them rin a long weh after being wounded—miles and miles they will go—but this wan wass so hard hit, I thought he would drop directly. The teffle tek him—I could hef given him the other barrel myself!"

And still they seemed loth to leave the ground, notwithstanding the gathering darkness. They kept wandering about, examining and searching; until it was quite obvious that even if the stag were lying within easy distance of them they could hardly distinguish it; so finally they withdrew beaten and baffled, and made away down to the lower country, where the old pony Maggie was probably wondering at their unusual length of absence.

That was a sombre ride home. It was now raining heavily; and all the night seemed to be filled with a murmuring of streams and a moaning of winds among the invisible hills. Roderick walked by the pony's head; and Lionel could just make him out, and no more, so pitch dark it was. Of course he had no idea of the route he was taking or of the nature of the ground they were getting over; but he could guess from Maggie's cautious steps when they were going over rough places, or he could hear the splash of her feet when they were crossing a swamp. Not a word was uttered; no doubt all the forester's attention was bent on making out a path; while as for Lionel, he was too wet and cold and miserable to think of talking to anybody. If he had certainly known that somewhere or other he had left up there a stag, which they could bring down in the morning, that would have consoled him somewhat; but it was just as likely as not that all this privation and fatigue had been endured for nothing. As they trudged along through the gloomy night, the rain fell more heavily than ever, and the bitter wind seemed to search out every bone in his body.

And then when at length they came within sound of the Geinig, there was no longer a friendly

voice welcoming them back to more familiar regions; it was an angry and threatening roar; he could see nothing; he could only imagine the wild torrent hurling along through this black desolation.

"Look here, Roderick," he said, "mind you keep away from that river. If we should stumble down one of the steep banks, we should never be heard of again."

"Oh, ay, we're a long distance from the ruvver; and it is as well to keep aweh; for if we were to get into the Geinig to-night, we would be tekken down like straws."

And how welcome was the small red ray that told of the shepherd's cottage just below the junction of the Geinig and the Aivron! It was a cheerful beacon; it spoke of human association and companionship; the moan of the hurrying Aivron seemed to have less of boding in it now. It is true they still had the two fords to encounter, and another long and weary tramp, before they got back to the lodge; but here at least was some assurance that they were out of those storm-haunted solitudes where the night was now holding high revel. That ray of light streaming from the solitary little window seemed to Lionel a blessed

thing; it served to dissipate the horrors of this murmuring and threatening blackness all around him; it cheered and warmed his heart; it was a joyful assurance that they were on the right way for home. When they reached the cottage, they knocked at the door; and presently there was a delightful ruddy glow in the midst of the dark. Would the gentleman not come in and warm himself at the fire, and get his clothes dried? No: Lionel said that getting wet through once was better than getting wet through twice; he would go on as he was. But might he have a glass of milk? The shepherd disappeared, and returned with a tumbler of milk and a piece of oatcake; and never in his life had the famous baritone from the far city of London tasted anything sweeter, for he was half-dead with hunger. Greatly refreshed by this opportune bit and sup, the tired and "droukit" rider cheerfully resumed his way; and it was with a stout heart that, after a certain time, he found Roderick cautiously leading the pony down to the water's edge. And then a sudden thought struck him.

"Look here, Roderick," said he, "I suppose I can get across this ford safely enough; but how on earth am I to know when I get to the next

one? I can't see a yard in front of the pony's head."

"I'm coming with ye, sir," was the simple answer; and at the same moment there was a general splashing which told him that both Maggie and the tall keeper were in the rushing stream.

"Well, I suppose you can't be wetter than you are," he said.

"Indeed that's true," Roderick answered, with much composure.

Now this first ford, though a ticklish thing in the pitch darkness, they managed successfully enough; but the next one proved a terrible business. Roderick went by the pony's head, with his hand on the bridle; but whether he helped Maggie, or whether Maggie helped him, it would be hard to say. Lionel could only guess what a mighty floundering there was going on; but Roderick kept encouraging his four-footed companion to hold up; and more than once, when they attained a safe footing, he called a halt to let the faithful Maggie recover her breath.

"Take your feet out o' the stirrups, sir," he said, when they were about half-way across; "there's some nasty sharp ledges the other side, and if she loses her footing, you'll chist slip off

before she goes over; and it will not tek ye above the waist whatever, so that you can get ashore by yourself."

When they did reach those ledges, Maggie seemed to understand the awkwardness of the situation quite as well as he; she went forward only an inch or two at a time; and if her hind feet occasionally skated a little, her fore feet remained firm where she had planted them. As for Lionel, he was of course quite helpless; he did not seek to interfere in any way; he was merely ready to slip off the saddle if Maggie rolled over. But presently a sudden red flash revealed to him that they were near land (this was Alec striking a vesuvian to give them a friendly lead); there was some further cautious sliding and stumbling forward; then the uplifting of Maggie's neck and shoulders told him she had gained solid ground and was going up the bank. Never was soft and sure foot-fall more welcome!

The arrival of the belated and bedrenched little party at the lodge created no little surprise; for it had been concluded that, having been led away by a long stalk, or perhaps following a wounded deer into unexpected regions, and finding themselves overtaken by the dark, they had struck across

country for the Aivron-Bridge Inn, to pass the night there. However, Sir Hugh bustled about to have his guest properly looked after; and when Lionel had got into dry clothes, and swallowed some bit of warmed-up dinner, he went into the drawing-room, where they were all of them playing poker—all of them, that is to say, except Lord Fareborough, who in a big easy chair by the fire was nursing his five-and-twenty ailments, and no doubt inwardly cursing those people for the chatter they were keeping up. They stopped their game when Lionel entered, to hear the news; and when he had told his heart-rending tale, Lady Adela's brother lazily called to her—

"I say, Addie, there's a chance for you to try that terrier of yours. If he's as intelligent as you say, send him out with the gillies to-morrow, and see if he can find the stag for them."

"Why, of course," Lady Adela instantly responded. "Mr. Moore, I have just become possessed of the wisest little terrier in the whole world, I do believe. He only arrived this evening; but he and I have been friends for a long time; I bought him only yesterday from a shepherd down the strath. Oh, I must show you the letter that came with the dog. Georgie, dear, would you

mind running into my room and bringing me a letter you will find on the dressing-table?"

Miss Georgie was absent only a couple of seconds; when she returned she handed Lionel the following epistle, which was written on a rather shabby sheet of paper. Its contents, however, were of independent value.

"Altnashielach. Tuesday moarning.

Lady Addela Cunningham,—

Honnerd Lady, I am sendin you the terrier by my sin Jeames that was takking the milk from Bragla to your ladyship's house the last year when he was butten by the red dog and your ladyship so kind as to giv him five shullins the terrier's name is Donacha bit he will soon answer to his English name that is Duncan Honnerd Lady you must be kind to him for he will be a little shy the first time he is awa from home and because he will not understand your languish as he was taught Gealic he got plenty of Blood on the foxes he can warry wan with himself alone let me no how you will be please with him and if he is behaved and obadient I will be glad to have the news

from your ladyship's humble servant

Magnus Ross, Altnashielach."

"A wee terrier that can worry a fox all by himself must be a gallant little beast, mustn't he?" said Lady Adela, who seemed quite proud of her new acquisition. "And I know he will find that stag for you, Mr. Moore, if he is to be found; for Donacha, or Duncan, is the wisest little creature you ever saw. I wish I could talk Gaelic, just to make him feel at home the first few days." Then she turned to her companions. "Who began this round—Mr. Lestrange? Very well, when it comes to Sybil, I propose we let you gentlemen go off to your cigars in the gun-room; for poor Mr. Moore, I know, hasn't been allowed to smoke all day; and I am sure he must be far too tired to think of playing poker. How many do you want, Rose?"

When this round of poker was finished, the gentlemen did not seem to resent being dismissed to the so-called gun-room, where, round the great, blazing peat fire, and with cigars and pipes and whiskey-and-soda to console them in their banishment, Lionel was called upon to give them more minute details regarding his day's adventures. And very various were the opinions expressed as to the chances of that stag being found. Some ominous stories were told of the extraordinary distances deer were known to have run even when

mortally wounded; and there were possibilities suggested of his having fallen into a rapid water-course and been carried down to the rushing river; while Sir Hugh ventured to hint that, if he were not found on the morrow, the probability was that some shepherd in his remote and lonely shieling just outside the forest would be feasting on venison for a considerable time to come. Lionel cared less now; heat and food had thawed him into a passive frame of mind; he was tired, worn-out, and sleepy; and very glad was he when he was allowed to go to bed.

As a matter of fact, that magic one-horned stag was not found on the next day; no, nor any following day; nor has it ever been heard of since in those parts. And if it vanished from the earth through some evil enchantment, be sure that Lionel—who had picked up some of the superstitions of the neighbourhood, and who had profited on a former occasion by the possession of a lucky sixpence—be sure he attributed his cruel ill-fortune, solely and wholly, to that wretched red rag that had been given him by Miss Georgie Lestrange.

CHAPTER III.

A GLOBE OF GOLD-FISH.

What, then, was the secret charm and fascination exercised over him by this extremely independent, not to say unapproachable, huntress-maiden; why should he be so anxious to win her approval; why should he desire to be continually with her—even when all her attention was given to her salmon-line, and she apparently taking no notice of him whatever? She was handsome, no doubt, and fine-featured, and pleasant to look upon; she was good-humoured, and friendly in her own way; and she had the education, and manners, and tact, and gentleness of one of her birth and breeding; but there were lots of other women similarly graced and gifted who were only too eager to welcome him and pet him and make much of him, and towards whom he found himself absolutely

indifferent. Was he falling in love? Had he been asked the question, he would honestly have answered that he was about the last person in the world to form a romantic attachment. There was no kind of sentimental wistfulness in his nature; his imagination had no poetical trick of investing the face and form of any passably good-looking girl with a halo of rainbow-hues; even as a lad his dreams had concerned themselves more with the possibility of his becoming a great musician than with his sharing his fame and glory with a radiant bride. But, above all, the rodomontade of simulated passion that he heard in the theatre, and the extravagance of action necessary for stage-effect, would of themselves have tended to render him sceptical and callous. He saw too much of how it was done. Did ever any man in his senses swear by the eternal stars in talking to a woman; and did ever any man in his senses kneel at a woman's feet? In former times they may have done so, when fustian and attudinising were not fustian and attudinising but common habit and practice; but in our own day did the love-making of the stage, with all its frantic gestures and wild appeals, represent anything belonging to actual life? Of course, if the question had been pushed

home, he would have had to admit that love as a violent passion does veritably exist, or otherwise there would not be so many young men blowing out their brains, and young women drowning themselves, out of disappointment; but probably he would have pointed out that in these cases the coroner's jury invariably and charitably certify that the victim is insane.

No; romance had never been much in his way, except the sham romance which he had assumed along with a painted face and a stage costume, and of which he knew the just and accurate value. He had never had time to fall seriously in love, he used to say to Maurice Mangan. And now, in this long spell of idleness in the north, amid these gracious surroundings, if he had had to confess that he found a singular fascination in the society of Honnor Cunyngham, why, he would have discovered a dozen reasons and excuses rather than admit that poetical sentiment had anything to do with it. For one thing, she was different from any woman he had ever met before; and that of itself piqued his curiosity. You had to speak the downright truth to her—when she looked at you with those clear hazel eyes: little make-believes of flattery were of no use at all.

Her very tranquillity and isolation were a sort of challenge; her almost masculine independence was like to drive a man to say 'I am as peremptory as she proud-minded.' Nevertheless, she was no curst Katherine; her temper was of the serenest; she was almost too bland and placid, Lionel thought—it showed she cared too little about you to be either exacting and petulant, or, on the other hand, solicitous to please.

There came into these silent and reverie-haunted solitudes a letter from the distant and turbulent world without; and of a sudden Lionel felt himself transported back into the theatre again, in the midst of all its struggles and hopes and anxieties, its jealousies and triumphs, its ceaseless clamour and unrest. The letter was from Nina.

"My dear friend Leo, I have waited now some time that I send you the critiques of my new part, but the great morning newspapers have taken no notice of poor Nina, it is only some of the weekly papers that have observed the change in the part, and you will see that they are very kind to me. Ah, but one—I do not send it—I could not send it to you, Leo—it has made me cry much and much that any one should have such malignity, such meanness, such

lying. I forget all the other ones; that one stabs my heart: but Mr. Carey he laughs and says to me You are foolish; you do not know why that is said of you? He is a great ally of Miss Burgoyne, he does not like to see you take her place, and be well received by the public. Perhaps it is true; but, Leo, you do not like to be told that you make the part stupid, that there is no life in it, that you are a *machine*, that you sing out of tune. I have asked Mr. Lehmann, I have asked Mr. Carey, and said to them If it is true, let me go; I will not make ridicule of your theatre. But they are so kind to me; and Mrs. Grey also; she says that I have not as much *cheek* as Miss Burgoyne, but that *Grace Mainwaring* should remember that she is a gentlewoman, and it is not necessary to make her a laughing waitress, although she is in comedy-opera. I cannot please every one, Leo: but if you were here I should not care so much for the *briccone*, who *lies*, who *lies*, who hides in the dark, like a thief. You know whether I sing out of tune, Leo. You know whether I am so stupid, so very stupid. Yes, I may not have *cheek;* I wish not to have *cheek;* even to commend myself to a critic. Ah, well, it is no use to be angry; every night I have a reception that

you would like to hear, Leo, for *you* have no jealousy; and my heart says *those* people are not under bad influence; they are honest in saying they are pleased; to *them* I sing not out of tune, and am not so very stupid. If I lie awake at night, and cry much, it is then I say to myself that I am stupid; and the next morning I laugh, when Mrs. Grey say some kind thing to me.

"Will you be surprised, most excellent Signor, if you have a visit from Miss Burgoyne? Yes, it is possible. The doctor says she has strained her voice by too long work—but it was a little *reedy* of its own nature, do you not think, Leo?—and says she must have entire rest, and that she must go to the Isle of White; but she said everyone was going to Scotland, and why not she, and her two friends, her travelling companions. Then she comes to me and ask your address. I answer—Why to me? There is Mr. Lehmann; and at the stage-door they will know his address, for letters to go. So, you see, you will not be alone in the high-lands, when you have such a *charming visitor* with you, and she will talk to you, not from behind a fan, as on the stage, but all the day, and you will have great comfort and satisfaction. Yes, I see her

arrive at the castle. She rings at the gate; your noble friends come out, and ask who she is; they discover, and drive away such a person as a poor cantatrice. But you hear, you come flying out, you rescue her from scorn—ah, it is pitiable, they all weep, they say to you that you are honourable and just, that they did wrong to despise your charming friend. Perhaps they ask her to dine; and she sings to them after; and Leo says to himself, Poor thing; no; her voice is not so reedy. The *dénouement?*—but I am not come to it yet; I have not arranged what will arrive then.

"What is the time of your return, Leo? And you know what will be then? You will find on the stage another *Grace Mainwaring*, who will sing always out of tune, and be so stupid that you will have fury and will complain to the Manager. Ah, there is now no one to speak with you from behind a fan—only a dull heavy stupid. Misera me! What shall I do? All the poetry departed from *Harry Thornhill's* singing—there is no more fascination for him—he looks up to the window—he sings 'The starry night brings me no rest'—and he says 'Bother to that stupid Italian girl!—why am I to sing to her?' Poor Leo, he will be disconsolate;

but not for long. No; Miss Burgoyne will be coming back; and then he will have some one for to talk with from behind the fan.

"Now, Leo, if you can read any more, I must attend to what you call *beesness*. When Miss Burgoyne returns, I do not go back to be understudy to Miss Girond—no—Mr. Lehmann has said he is pleased with me, and I am to take the part of Miss Considine, who goes into the provincial company. You know it is almost the same consequence as *Grace Mainwaring* towards the public, and I am, oh, very proud of such an advancement; and I have written to Pandiani, and to Carmela and Andrea, and Mrs. Grey is kinder than ever, and I take lessons always and always when she has a half-hour from the house-governing. I am *letter perfect*—is it what they say?—in this part as in the other; my bad English does not appear on the stage; I practise and practise always. I am to share in Miss Girond's room, and that will be good, for she is friendly to me, though sometimes a little saucy in her amusement. Already I hear that the theatre-attendant people are coming back—and you?—when is your return? You had benevolence to the poor chorus-singer, Signor Leo; and now she is prima donna do you think she will

forget you? No, no! To-day I was going up Regent Street, and in a window behold! a portrait of Mr. Lionel Moore and a portrait of Miss Antonia Ross side by side! I laughed—I said, Leo did not look to this a short time ago. It is the same fotografer; I have had several requests; but only to that one I went, for it is the best one of you he has taken that is seen anywhere. Of course I have to dress as like Miss Burgoyne as possible, which is a pity to me, for it is not too graceful, as I think I could do; but I complain nothing, since Mr. Lehmann gave me the great advancement; and if you will look at the critiques you will see they say I have not a bad appearance in the part. As for the *briccone* —pah!—when I talk like this to you, Leo, I despise him—he is nothing to me—I would not pay twopence that he should praise me.

"Will you write to me, Leo, and say when you return? Have you so much *beesness* that you have only sent me one letter? Adieu! Your true friend, NINA."

Well, this prattling letter from Nina caused him some reflection, and some uneasy qualms. He did not so much mind the prospect of having, on his return, to transform his old friend and comrade into his stage-sweetheart, and to make

passionate love to her every evening, before an audience. That might be a little embarrassing at first; but the feeling would soon wear off; such circumstances were common and well-understood in the theatre, where stage-lovers cease their cooing the moment they withdraw into the wings. But this other possibility of finding Miss Burgoyne and her friends in the immediate neighbourhood of Strathaivron Lodge? Of course there was no reason why she shouldn't travel through Ross-shire just as well as any one else. She knew his address. If she came anywhere round this way—say to Kilfearn—he must needs go to call on her. Then both Lady Adela Cunyngham and Lord Rockminster had been introduced to Miss Burgoyne in the New Theatre: if he told them, as he ought, on whom he was going to call, might they not want to accompany him, and renew the acquaintance? Lady Adela and her sisters considered themselves the naturally appointed patrons of all professional folk whose names figured in the papers; was it not highly probable that Miss Burgoyne and her friends, whosoever these might be, would receive an invitation to Strathaivron Lodge? And then?—why, then might there not be rather too close a resemblance to a band of

poor players being entertained by the great people at what Nina imagined to be a castle? A solitary guest was all very well: had Miss Burgoyne preceded or succeeded him, he could not have objected: but a group of strolling players, as it were?—might it not look as if they had been summoned to amuse the noble company? And fancy Miss Burgoyne coming in as a spy upon his mute, and at present quite indefinite, relations with Miss Honnor Cunyngham!—Miss Burgoyne, who was a remarkably sharp-eyed young woman, and had a clever and merry tongue withal, when she was disposed to be humorous.

Then he bethought him of what Honnor Cunyngham, with her firm independence of character, her proud self-reliance, would have said to all these nervous fancies. He knew perfectly well what she would say. She would say: "Well, but even if Miss Burgoyne were to appear at Strathaivron Lodge, how could that affect you? You are yourself; you are apart from her; her visit will be Lady Adela's doing, not yours. And if people choose to regard you as one of a band of strolling players, how can that harm you? Why should you care? The opinion that is of value to you is your own opinion: be right with yourself; and

leave others to think what they please. Whoever could so entirely misjudge your position must be a fool: why should you pause for a moment to consider the opinion of a fool or any number of fools? 'To thine own self be true'; and let that suffice."

For he had come to know pretty accurately, during these frequent if intermittent talks and chats along the Aivron banks, how Miss Honnor would regard most things. The wild weather had been succeeded by a period of calm; the river had dwindled and dwindled, until it seemed merely to creep along its channel; where a rushing brown current had come down there now appeared long banks of stones, lilac and silver-grey and purple, basking in the sun; while half way across the stream in many places the yellow sand and shingle shone through the lazily-rippling shallows. Consequently there was little fishing to be done. Honnor Cunyngham went out all the same, for she loved the river-side in all weathers; and as often as he discreetly might, Lionel accompanied her; but as they had frequently to wait for half-hours together until a cloud should come over, he had ample opportunity of learning her views and opinions on a great variety of subjects. For she

spoke freely, and frankly, and simply, in this enforced idleness; and from just a little touch here and there, Lionel began to think that she must have a good deal more of womanly tenderness and sympathy than he had given her credit for. Certainly she was always most considerate towards himself; she seemed to understand that he was a little sensitive on the score of his out-of-door performances; and while she made light of his occasional blunders, she would quietly hint to him that he in turn ought to exercise a generous judgment when those people at the Lodge ventured to enter a province in which he was a past master.

"We are all amateurs in something or another, Mr. Moore," she would say. "And the professionals should not treat us with scorn."

"I wonder in what you show yourself an amateur," said he, bethinking himself how she seemed to keep aloof from the music, art, and literature of her accomplished sisters-in-law. "Everything you do you do thoroughly well."

She laughed.

"You have never seen me try to do anything but cast a line," said she, "and if I can manage that, the credit rests with old Robert."

But the consideration that she invariably extended to her brother's guest was about to show itself in a very marked manner; and the incident arose in this wise. One morning, the weather being much too bright and clear for the shallower pools of the Aivron, they thought they would take luncheon with them, and stroll up to the Geinig, where, in the afternoon, the deeper pools might give them a chance, especially if a few clouds were to come over. Accordingly the three of them went away along the valley, passed over the Bad Step, meandered through the long birch wood, and finally arrived at the little dell above the Geinig Pool, which was Miss Honnor's favourite retreat. They had left somewhat late; the sun was shining from a cloudless sky; luncheon would pass the useless time; so Robert got the small parcels and the drinking cups out of the bag, and arranged them on the warm turf. It was a modest little banquet, but in the happiest circumstances; for the birch branches above them afforded them a picturesque shelter; and the burn at their feet, attenuated as it was, and merely threading its way down through the stones, flashed diamonds here and there in the light. And then she was so kind as to thank him again for singing 'The

Bonnie Earl o' Moray'—which had considerably astounded the people assembled at the opening of the Kilfearn Public Hall, or, at least, such of them as did not know that a great singer was among the guests at Strathaivron Lodge.

"I was rather sorry for them who had to follow you," she said: "they must have felt it was hardly fair. It was like Donald Dinnie at the Highland Games: when he has thrown the hammer, or tossed the caber, the spectator hardly takes notice of the next competitor. By the way, I suppose you will be going to the Northern meeting at the end of this month?"

"I am sorry I cannot stay so long, though Lady Adela was good enough to ask me," he made answer. "I must go south very soon now."

"Oh, indeed?" she said. "That is a pity. It is worth while being in Inverness then: you see all the different families and their guests; and the balls are picturesque—with the kilt and tartan. It is really the wind-up of the season; the parties break up after that. We come back here and remain until about the middle of October; then we go on to the Braes—worse luck for me. I like the rough-and-tumble of this place; the absence of

ceremony; the freedom and the solitude. It will be very different at the Braes."

"Why shouldn't you stop on here, then?" he naturally asked.

"All by myself?" she said. "Well, I shouldn't mind the loneliness—you see, old Robert is left here, and Roderick, too, and one or two of the girls to keep fires on; but I should have nothing to do but read; the fishing is useless long before that time. And so you are going away quite soon?"

"Yes," said he, and he paused for a second—for there was some wild wish in his heart that she would express just one word of regret. "I must go," he continued, seeing that she did not speak. "I am wanted. And I have had a long holiday—a long and delightful holiday; and I'm sure when I look back over it, I can't thank you sufficiently for all your kindness to me."

"Thank me, Mr. Moore?" she said, with obvious surprise.

"Oh, yes, indeed," he said warmly. "If it was only a word now and again, it was always encouragement. I should never have ventured out after the deer if it had not been for you: probably I should never have taken up a gun at all. Then all those delightful days by the river: haven't I to

thank you for them? It seems rather hard that I should be so much indebted to you—— "

"I am sure you are not at all," she said.

"—— without a chance of ever being able to show my gratitude: repayment, of course, is out of the question, for we could never meet again in similar circumstances—in reversed circumstances, rather—I mean, you have had it all your own way in your—your toleration, shall I say?—or your commiseration, of a hopeless duffer. Oh, I know what I'm talking about. Most people in your position would have said, 'Well, let him go and make a fool of himself!' and most people in my position would have said, 'No, I'm not going to make a fool of myself.'"

"I don't quite understand," she said, simply, "why you should care so much for the opinion of other people."

"I suppose there is no chance of my ever seeing you in London, Miss Honnor," he continued, rather breathlessly. "If—if I might presume on the acquaintanceship formed up here, I should like—well, I should like to show you I had not forgotten your kindness. Do you ever come to London?—I think Miss Lestrange said you sometimes did."

"Why, I am in London a great part of every year!" she said. "And this winter I shall be next door to it; for my mother goes to Brighton in November; and she will want me to be with her."

"To Brighton!" he said quickly and eagerly. "Then of course you would be in London sometimes. Would you—would you care to come behind the scenes of a theatre?—or be present at a dress rehearsal, or something of that kind? No, I'm afraid not — I'm afraid that wouldn't interest you——"

"Oh, but it would," she said, pleasantly enough. "It would interest me very much."

And perhaps he would have gone on to assure her how delighted he would be to have the opportunity of showing her, in the great capital, that he had not forgotten her kindness and help in these northern wilds, but that Miss Honnor, seeing that their frugal meal was over, called for Robert. The handsome old fisherman appeared at once; but she instantly perceived by his face that something was wrong.

"This is ferry strange, Miss Honnor," said he, "that the fly-book is not in the bag. And I could not have dropped it out. I was not thinking of

looking for it when we started, for I knew I had put it there——"

"Oh, I know, Robert," she said at once. "Mr. Lestrange asked me this morning for some small Durham Rangers; and I told him to go and take them out of the book. So he has taken the book out of the bag, and stupidly forgot to put it back."

"Then I will go aweh down to the Lodge and get it," Robert suggested.

"Is it worth while?" she said. "There is a fly on the casting-line; and there won't be much fishing this afternoon?"

"I am not so sure," old Robert made answer. "There might be some clouds; and it is safer to hef the book whatever."

"Very well," said she. "And in that case I will take Mr. Moore over to the other side of the Geinig Pool, and ask him to creep out on the middle rock; and perhaps he will see something. Will there be any gold-fish in the globe, Robert?"

Old Robert grinned.

"Oh yes, Miss Honnor, the fish will be there; but there is little chance of your getting one out."

"At any rate, Mr. Moore will be pleased to see

a globe of gold-fish in the middle of a Highland moor," she said; and when Robert had packed up the luncheon things, they all set off down the Geinig valley together.

But when they reached a certain wooden foot-bridge across the stream, Robert held on his way, making for the Lodge, while Lionel, well content, and asking no questions, followed the young lady. She led the way across the bridge, and along the opposite bank, until they reached the Geinig Pool, where they scrambled down to the side of the river, just above the falls. Here she showed him how to step from one boulder to another until he found himself on a huge grey rock right in the middle; and forthwith she directed him to crawl out to the edge of the rock, and just put his head over, and see what he could see. As for crawling, he considered himself quite an adept at that now; in an instant he was down on hands and knees, making his way out to the end of the rock. And certainly what he beheld when he cautiously peered over the edge was worth all the trouble. Here, in an almost circular pool, apparently of great depth, the surface of the water was as smooth as glass; for the bulk of the stream tumbled in and tumbled out again along the southern side, leaving

this dark hole in an eddy; and the sunlight, striking down into the translucent depths, revealed to him certain slowly moving forms which he recognised at once as salmon. They were not like salmon in colour, to be sure; through the dun water their purplish-blue backs showed a dull olive-green; but salmon they undoubtedly were, and of a good size too. Of course he was immensely excited by such a novel sight. With intensest curiosity he watched them making their slow circles of the pool, exactly like gold-fish in a globe. They seemed to be about four or five feet under the surface. Was it not possible to snatch at one of them with a long gaff? Or was it not possible, on the other hand, to tempt one of them with a fly?

He slowly withdrew his head.

"That is most extraordinary," he called to his companion, who was standing a few yards further back. "Miss Honnor, won't you put a fly over them?"

"What is the use?" said she. "They will look at it; but they won't take it; and I don't think it is well they should know too much about the patterns that Mr. Watson dresses. They know quite enough already. Some of the old hands, I

do believe, are familiar with every fly made in Inverness."

"Won't you try?" he pleaded.

"Well, if you would like to see them look at the fly, I'll put it over them," she said goodnaturedly, "but, you know, it is most demoralising."

So she, also, had to creep out to the edge of the rock; and then she cautiously put out the rod, and the short line she had previously prepared. She threw the fly to the opposite side of the pool; let it sink an inch or two; and then quietly jerked it across, until it came in the way of the slow-circling salmon. To her it was merely an amusement, but to Lionel it was a breathless excitement, to watch one after another of those big fish, in passing, come up to look at this beautiful, gleaming, shrimp-like object, and then sink down again and go on its round. They would not come within two feet of this tempting lure. She tried them in all parts of the pool, sinking the fly well into the plunging fall, and letting it be carried right to the other side before she dragged it across the clear open.

"Won't one of you take it?" she said. "It's as pretty a fly as ever was dressed, though they do call it the Dirty Yellow."

But all of a sudden the circumstances were changed in a most startling manner. A swift, half-seen creature came darting up from out of the plunging torrent, shot into the clear water, snatched at the small object that was floating there, and down went fly and rod until the top was almost touching the surface. The reel had caught in her dress somehow. But in another second all that was altered—she had got the reel free—she was up on her feet—the line was singing out—the rod raised, with the pliant top yielding to every movement of the fish—and Lionel, quite bewildered by the rapidity of the whole occurrence, wondering what he could do to assist her. Miss Honnor, however, was quite competent to look after herself.

"Who could have expected that!" she said, as the salmon went away down into the deep pool, and deliberately sulked there. "I wasn't fishing, I was only playing; and he very nearly broke me, at the first plunge. Really it all happened so quickly that I could not see what size he was: could you, Mr. Moore?"

"Not I!" he answered. "The creature came out of the rough water like a flash of lightning—I only saw the splash his tail made as he went down

again. But what are you going to do, Miss Honnor? Shall I run down the strath, and tell old Robert to hurry back?"

"Not at all!—we'll manage him by ourselves," she replied, confidently. "Here, you take him; and I'll gaff him for you."

"I will do nothing of the kind," said he, distinctly. "You have given me too many of your fish. You have been far too generous all the way through. No; I will gaff him for you—but you must tell me how—for I never tried before."

"Oh, it is simple enough," she said. "You've seen old Robert gaff plenty of fish. Only mind you don't strike across the casting-line. Get behind the casting-line—about half way down the fish—get well over him—and then a sharp, bold stroke will fetch him out."

Accordingly, armed with the gaff, Lionel made his way down to the lowest ridge of the rock, so that he found himself just over the black-brown pool. And indeed his services were called upon much sooner than he had expected; for the salmon, grown tired of sulking, now began to swim slowly round and round, sometimes coming up so that they could just catch a glimmer of him, and again disappearing. But the fortunate thing for them

was that there were no shallows to frighten the fish; he knew nothing of his danger as he happened to come sailing round Lionel's way; and he was gradually coming nearer and nearer to the surface, until they could watch his every motion as he made his slow rounds. Once or twice Lionel tried to get the gaff over him, and had to withdraw it; but at last Miss Honnor called out——

"This next time, Mr. Moore, as he comes round to you, I will lift him a bit: be ready!"

But what was this amazing thing that happened all in one wild second? Lionel struck at the fish, pinned him securely, dragged him out of the water, and then, to his horror, found that the unexpected weight of this fighting and struggling creature was proving too much for him—he was overbalanced—he could not recover himself—down they all went together, himself, the gaff, and the salmon, into the still, deep pool! As for him, that was nothing; he could swim a little; a few strokes took him to the other side, where he clambered on to the rocks; he managed to recover his cap; and then, with the deepest mortification in his soul, he made his way back to rejoin his companion. What apology could he offer for his unheard-of bungling and stupidity? Would she not look on him as an unendurable

ass? Why had he chosen so insecure a foothold; and made such a furious plunge at the fish? Over-eagerness, no doubt——

And then the next moment he noticed that her rod was still curved!

"We'll get him yet, Mr. Moore!" she called to him, in the most good-humoured fashion. "Come out on to the rock, and you'll see the strangest looking salmon you ever saw in your life."

And indeed that was an odd sight—the big fish slowly sailing round and round the pool, with the gaff still attached, and the handle floating parallel with its side.

"It will take some time, though," said she. "I think you'd better go away home and get dry clothes on. I'll manage him by myself."

"I dare say you would manage him better by yourself than with any help of mine," he said, in his bitter chagrin and self-contempt. "I made sure I had lost you the salmon."

"And what then?" she said, with some surprise. "I assure you it wasn't the salmon I was thinking of when I saw you in the water—but the moment you struck out I knew you were safe."

He did not speak any more; he was too humiliated and vexed. It is true that when at length

the salmon, entirely dead beat, suffered himself to be led into the side of the rock, Lionel managed to seize the handle of the gaff, and this time, making sure of his foothold, got the fish on land; but this final success in no way atoned for his having so desperately made a fool of himself. In silence he affixed the bit of string she gave him to the head and tail of this very pretty twelve-pounder; and in silence he set out, he carrying the salmon, and she with the rod over her shoulder.

"It will be a surprise for old Robert when we meet him," she said, cheerfully. "But he will wonder how you came to be so drenched."

"Yes," said he, "it will be a pretty story of tomfoolery for them all to hear. I should like to make a comic drawing of it, if I could. It would have done capitally for John Leech, among the exploits of Mr. Briggs."

She glanced at him, curiously. She knew what he was thinking of—of the tale that would be told among the keepers and the gillies of his having soused himself into the Geinig Pool in trying to gaff a fish. And might not the story find its way from the kennels into the gun-room, and thence into the drawing-room?

There was no doubt he was thoroughly ashamed,

and crestfallen, and angry with himself; and though she talked and chatted just as usual, he was quite taciturn all the way down the side of the Geinig. They reached the Junction Pool.

"Come now, Mr. Moore," she said, with the utmost good-nature, "you make too much of that little mistake. You are far too afraid of ridicule. But I am going to put it all right for you."

What was his astonishment and consternation to see her, after she had laid her rod on the shingle, deliberately walk a yard or two into the shallow water, and then throw herself down into it for a second, while she held out her hand to him!

"Pull me out, Mr. Moore!" she said.

"Good heavens, Miss Honnor!" he exclaimed—but instantly he caught her hand, and she rose to her feet, and began to shake the water from her as best she might. "What do you mean!"

"You've pulled me out of the river," said she, laughing, as she shook her dripping sleeves and her skirts; and then she went on coolly to explain. "I know you are rather sensitive to ridicule; and you don't like to think of those people telling the story against you as to how you fell into the Geinig Pool. Very well; there needn't

be any such story. If any one asks you how you came to be so wet, you can say I got into the water, and you pulled me out. It will sound quite heroic."

"So I am to have the credit of having saved your life?" he said.

"You needn't put it that way," she answered, as she took up the fishing-rod and resumed her homeward walk. "All kinds of accidents are continually happening to people who go salmon-fishing; and no one takes any notice of them. My maid is quite used to getting my things dried —whether they're soaked through with rain or with river-water doesn't much matter to her. And old Robert can take your clothes to the fire in the gun-room long before the gentlemen come back from the hill. So, you see, there will probably be no questions asked; but if there should be, you have what is quite enough of an explanation."

"Well, Miss Honnor," said he, "I never heard of such a friendly act in all my life—such a gratuitous sacrifice: here you have risked getting your death of cold in order to save my childish vanity from being wounded. Really, I don't know how to thank you—though I wish all the same you had not put me under such a tremendous obligation.

But don't imagine that I am going to claim—that I am going to steal—the credit of having saved your life—I am not quite so mean—no, if I am asked, I will tell the whole truth——"

"And make two people ridiculous instead of one?" she said, with a smile. "No you can't do that."

However, as it turned out, this Quixotic act of consideration was allowed to remain a dark secret between these two. With the brisk walking and the warm sunlit air around them their clothes were already drying; and when old Robert met them, in the dusky chasm at the foot of the Bad Step, he was far too much engaged with the fish to notice their limp and damp garments; while again, as they resumed their march, he, carrying the fish, lagged in the rear, and thus they escaped his keen eyes. Indeed, by the time they reached the Lodge, and as Miss Honnor was about to enter, Lionel said to her that he felt quite warm and comfortable, and proposed to go for a further walk down the strath before dinner; but she peremptorily forbade this, and ordered him off to his own room to get changed.

It is not to be imagined that an incident of this kind could do aught but sink deep into the mind of

any young man, and especially into the mind of a young man who had particular reasons for wanting to know how this young lady was affected towards him. She herself had made light of the matter; it had been merely a sudden impulse, born of her own abundant good-nature; probably she would have done as much for Percy Lestrange. But *would* she have done as much for Percy Lestrange? Lionel kept asking himself. He was vain enough to think she would not. Who had been her *protegé* all this time? To whom had she given unobtrusive little hints when she thought these might be useful? In whose exploits and triumphs and failures had she shown an exceptional interest and sympathy? Whom had she permitted to go fishing with her on those long days, when the world seemed to belong to the two of them?—whom had she admitted into the little dell above the Geinig Pool which was her chosen and solitary retreat? And he could not but reflect that while there were plenty of women who were eager to present him with silver cigarette-cases, blue and white flower-jars, and things of that kind, there was not one of them, as he believed, who would dip her little finger in a bottle of ink for his sake. More than that, which of them would herself have

dared ridicule in order to save him from ridicule? And in what light should he regard this suddenly-prompted action on her part, which seemed to him so bewildering at the time, but which she appeared to look on as only a sort of half-humorous freak of friendship?

These speculations only came back to the original question, or series of questions, that had already puzzled him. Why should he set such store by her opinion?—why be so anxious to please her?—why be so proud to think that he had won some small share of favourable regard? It was not his ordinary attitude towards women, who troubled him rather, and interfered with his many interests and the calls of his professional duties. Falling in love?—that could hardly be it: he felt no desire whatever to go down on his knees before her, and swear by the eternal stars. Besides, she was so far away from him—living in such a different sphere—among occupations and surroundings and traditions entirely apart from his. Falling in love?—with the isolated, the unapproachable fisher-maiden, the glance of whose calm hazel eyes would be death to any kind of theatrical sentiment? It was all a confusion and a perplexity to him; but at least he was glad to

know that he would sit at the same table with her that night at dinner, and thereafter, perchance, have some opportunity of talking to her in the drawing-room, where a certain incident, known to themselves alone, would serve as a sort of secret tie. And he was cheered to remember that, although he was leaving this still and beautiful neighbourhood (where so many strange dreams and fancies and new and welcome experiences had befallen him) he was not bidding good-bye to all of these friends for ever. Miss Honnor Cunyngham would be in Brighton in November; and Brighton was not so far away from the great city and the dull, continuous, thunderous roar that would then be all around him.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW EXPERIENCE.

Was it possible in the nature of things that Prince Fortunatus should find his spirits dashed with gloom—he whose existence had hitherto been a long series of golden moments, each brighter and welcomer than the other? Even if he had to leave this still and beautiful valley where he had found so much gracious companionship and so many pleasant pursuits, look what was before him: he was returning to be greeted with the applause of enthusiastic audiences, to be sought after and courted and petted in private circles, to find himself talked about in the newspapers and his portraits exhibited in every other shop window—in short, to enjoy all the little flatteries and attentions and triumphs attaching to a wide and not ill-deserved popularity. And yet as he sate at this farewell luncheon on the day of his departure, he

was the only silent one among these friends of his, who were all chattering around him.

"I'm sure I envy you, Mr. Moore," said his charming hostess, "going away back to the very centre of the intellectual world. It will be such a change for you to find yourself in the very midst of everything—hearing about all that is going on —the new books, the new plays, the new pictures. I suppose that in October there are plenty of pleasant people back in town; and perhaps the dinner-parties are all the more enjoyable when you know that the number of nice people is limited. One really does get tired of this mental stagnation——"

"I wish, Mr. Moore," said Lady Rosamund, rather spitefully (considering that her brother was present), "you would take Rockminster with you. He won't go on the hill; and he's no use in the drawing-room. I am certain at this minute he would rather be walking down St. James's Street to his club."

"I don't wonder at it!" cried Miss Georgie Lestrange, coming gallantly to the apathetic young man's rescue. "Look how he's situated. There's Sir Hugh and my brother away all day; Lord Fareborough has never come out of his room since

the morning he tried deerstalking; and what can Lord Rockminster find to amuse him in a pack of girls? Oh, I know what he thinks of us," she continued, very placidly. "I remember, if he chooses to forget. Don't you recollect, Rose, the night we were constructing an ideal kingdom by drawing up a list of all the people we should have banished? Every one had his or her turn at saying who should be expelled—people who come late to dinner, people who fence with spiked wire, people who talk in theatres, people who say 'like he does,' and so forth; and when somebody suggested 'All young women who wear red veils,' Lord Rockminster immediately added 'And all young women who don't wear red veils.' Now you needn't deny it—— "

"Excuse me, I'm sure I never said anything of the kind; but it's not of the least consequence," Lord Rockminster observed, with perfect composure. "Anything to please you poor dears. You understand well enough why I linger on here—just to give you young creatures a chance of sharpening your wits on me. You wouldn't know what to do without me."

"Rockminster is going to give the world a volume of poems," said Lady Rosamund, who

seemed to be rather ill-tempered and scornful this morning. "Nobody could stare at the clouds and hills as he does without being a poet. When he does burst into speech it will be something awful."

"Have you your flask filled?" said that much-bepestered young man, calmly turning to Lionel.

"Oh, yes, thanks."

"When you get to Invershin," his lordship continued thoughtfully, "you can telegraph to the Station Hotel at Inverness what you want for dinner. No soup; I make it a rule never to take soup in a big hotel; a friendly manager once warned me in confidence. You'll be glad to have a bit of white fish after so much grilse and sea-trout—"

"Oh, I'll take my chance," Lionel said: it was not dinner that was occupying his thoughts.

There was a sound of horses' hoofs and carriage wheels: the waggonette was being brought round to the front door.

"I consider it very shabby of Honnor not to have stayed to say good-bye," Lady Adela said to her departing guest. "She might have given up one morning's fishing, I think, especially as you have been such an assiduous attendant—carrying

her things for her, and keeping her company on those long excursions—"

"Oh, don't be afraid," said Miss Georgie, with a bit of a covert laugh. "Honnor won't forsake her friend like that. I'll bet you she won't be far from the Horse's Drink when Mr. Moore has to cross the stream."

"If I were you," Lord Rockminster finally said, in a confidential undertone, as they all rose from the table, "I would telegraph about dinner."

How Lionel hated the sight of this open door, and the waggonette, and the portmanteau up beside the coachman!

"Good-bye, Mr. Moore," said the pleasant-mannered young matron to him, as she took his hand for a moment. "I'm afraid it has been awfully dull for you—"

"Lady Adela!" he said.

"But the next time you come we shall try to be less monotonously bucolic. Perhaps by then the phonograph will be able to bring us a whole musical evening from London, whenever we want it—a whole performance of an operetta——"

"Offenbach in a Highland valley!" he exclaimed.

"No," she said, very quietly and graciously;

"but perhaps something by the composer of *The Squire's Daughter*—and there might be in it an air as delightful as that of 'The Starry Night.' Oh, Mr. Moore, don't let them produce any other piece at the New Theatre until we all get back to London again! Well, good-bye—it's so kind of you to have taken pity on us in this wilderness——"

"If you knew how sorry I am to go, Lady Adela!" he said. "And will you say good-bye for me to Miss Cunyngham?"

"You needn't bother to leave a message," said Miss Georgie, with significant eyes. "You'll find she won't be far away from the Horse's Drink."

And as it chanced, Miss Georgie's forecast (whether inspired by a saucy impertinence or not) proved correct. Lionel, having bade farewell to all these friends, got into the waggonette; and away the carriage went—quietly, at first, over the soft turf and stones—to the river. Of course he looked out. Yes, there was Miss Honnor—fishing the Whirl Pool—with old Robert sitting on the shingle, watching her. Would she notice?—or would he get down, and walk along to her, and claim the good-bye she had forgotten? The next moment he was reassured. She caught sight of the approaching waggonette; she carefully placed her

rod on the shingle, and then came walking along the river-bank, towards the ford, at which the horses had now arrived.

Even at a distance he could not but admire the grace and ease and dignity of her carriage—the harmonious movement of a perfectly-formed figure; and as she drew nearer he kept asking himself (as if the question were necessary) whether he would be able to take away a keen mental photograph of those fine features—the clear and placid forehead, the strongly-marked eyebrows, the calm, self-reliant eyes, the proud and yet not unsympathetic lines of the mouth. She came nearer; a smile lit up her face; and there was a kind of radiance there, he thought. He had leapt down from the waggonette; he went forward to meet her; her hand was outstretched.

"I am sorry you are going," she said, frankly.

"And I am far more sorry to have to go," said he, and he held her hand a little longer than there was any occasion for, until she gently withdrew it. "There are so many things I should like to say to you, Miss Honnor; but somehow they always escape you just when they're wanted; and I've told you so often before that I am not likely to forget your kindness to me up here——"

"Surely it is the other way about!" she said, pleasantly. "You have come and cheered up my lonely hours—and been so patient—never grumbled—never looked away up the hill as if you would have given your life to be after the grouse—and in the drawing-room of an evening you've always sung when I asked you—when I was inconsiderate enough to ask you——"

"My goodness, Miss Honnor," he said, "if I had known you looked on it in that light, I should have sung for you constantly, whether you asked or not."

"Well, it's all over now," said she, "and I hope you are taking away with you a pleasant memory of Strathaivron."

"I have spent the happiest days of my life here," he said; and then he hesitated—was about to speak—hesitated again—and finally blurted out: "Is there anything I can do for you in London, Miss Honnor?"

"No, thanks," she said. "By the way, you'll have an hour or two in Inverness. You might go in to Mr. Watson's and ask him to send me out a few more flies—if you have plenty of time, that is."

"I shall be delighted," said he, as if she had conferred the greatest favour on him.

"Well, good-bye—I mustn't keep you late for the train."

"But we shall meet in the South?"

"I hope so," she said, in a very amiable and friendly fashion; and she stood waiting there until he had got into the waggonette and until the horses had splashed their way across the ford: then she waved her hand to him, and, with a parting smile, turned down the stream again, to rejoin Robert and pick up her rod.

Nor was this quite the last he was to see of those good friends. When the horses had strenuously hauled the carriage up that steep hill-side and got into the level highway, he turned to look back at the Lodge set in the midst of the wide strath, and behold! there was a fluttering of white handkerchiefs there, Lady Adela, and her sisters, and Miss Georgie, still lingering in the porch. Again and again he made response. Then, as he drove on, he caught another glance of Miss Honnor, who, far below him, was industriously fishing the Whirl Pool; when she heard the sound of the wheels, she looked up and waved her hand to him as he went by. Finally there came the crack of a gun across the wide strath; it was a signal from the shooting-party—away on a distant hill-side—and

he could just make out that they, also, were sending him a telegraphic good-bye. At each opening through the birch-wood skirting the road he answered these farewells, until Strathaivron Lodge was no longer in sight; and then he settled himself in his seat, and resigned himself to the long journey.

This was not a pleasant drive. He was depressed with a vague aching and emptiness of the heart that he could not well account for. A schoolboy returning to his tasks after a long holiday could not be more profoundly miserable—more hopeless, dissatisfied, and ill at ease. And perhaps it was the loss of one of those pleasant companions that was troubling him? Which one, then (he made pretence of asking himself), was he sorriest to part from? Lady Adela, who was always so bright and talkative and cheerful, so charming a hostess, so considerate and gentle a friend? Or the mystic-eyed Lady Sybil, who many an evening had led him away into the wonderland of Chopin, for she was an accomplished pianist, if her own compositions were but feeble echoes of the masters? Or the more quick-spirited Lady Rosamund, the imperious and petulant beauty, who, in a way most unwonted with her, had bestowed upon

him exceptional favour? Or that atrocious little flirt, Miss Georgie Lestrange, with her saucy smiles and speeches, her malicious laugh, and demure, significant eyes?—it was hardly to be wondered at if she made an impression on any young man, for the minx had an abundance of good looks, despite her ruddy hair and pert nose. As for Miss Honnor Cunyngham—oh, no!—she was too far away—she lived remote, isolated, apart—she neither gave nor demanded sympathy or society—she was sufficient unto herself alone. But why ask whether it was this one or that? Soon he would be forgotten by them all. He would be swallowed up in the great city—swept away in the current of its feverish activities—his voice hardly heard above the general din; while they would still be pursuing their various pastimes in this little world of solitude and quiet, or moving on to entertain their friends with the more pompous festivities of the Braes.

It was odd that he should be carrying away with him the seeds of home-sickness for a place in which his stay had been counted by weeks. So anxious, indeed, was he to assure himself that his relations with that beautiful valley and its inmates were not entirely severed that, the moment he

reached Inverness, instead of going into the Station Hotel and ordering his dinner like a reasonable being, he must needs go straightway off to Mr. Watson's shop.

"I suppose," said he, with a little hesitation—for he did not know whether to mention Miss Cunyngham's name or not—he was afraid he might betray some quite uncalled-for embarrassment—"I suppose you know the flies they use on the Aivron this time of year."

Mr. Watson knew well enough; who better?

"I mean on the Strathaivron Lodge stretch of the water?" Lionel continued.

"Oh, yes; I am often sending flies to Miss Cunyngham," was the answer.

"Oh, Miss Cunyngham?" said Lionel. "It is for her I want some flies."

"Very well, sir, I will make up a small packet, and send it to her: Miss Cunyngham has an account with me——"

"No, no, that isn't what I mean at all," Lionel interposed, hastily. "I want to make Miss Cunyngham a little present. The fact is, I was using her book," he observed, with some importance (as if it could in the least concern a worthy tackle-maker in Inverness to know who

had gone fishing with Miss Cunyngham), "and I whipped off a good number, so I want to make amends, don't you see?"

"Very well, sir: how many will I put up?"

"All you've got," was the prompt reply.

Mr. Watson stared.

"Oh, yes," Lionel said. "Miss Cunyngham may as well have a good stock at once. You know the proper kinds—Blue Doctors, Childerses, Jock Scotts, Dirty Yellows, Bishops, Bees—that's about it, isn't it?—and put in plenty of various sizes. Then don't make a parcel of them; put them into those japanned boxes with the cork in them—never mind how many; and if you can't tell me at once how much it will all come to, I will leave you my London address, and you'll send the bill to me. Now if you will be so kind as to give me a sheet of paper and an envelope I will write a note to accompany the packet."

Mr. Watson probably thought that this young man was daft; but it was not his business to say so; he took down his erratic customer's address, and said that all his instructions would be attended to forthwith.

Next Lionel went to a tobacconist's shop and (for he was a most lavish young man) he ordered

a prodigious quantity of "twist," which he had made up into two parcels, the smaller one for Roderick, the larger to be divided equally among the other keepers and gillies. The two parcels he had put into a wooden case, which, again, was filled up with boxes of vesuvians—three or four dozen or so; and it is to be imagined that when *that* small hamper was opened at Strathaivron, there was many a chuckle of gratification over the division of the splendid spoil.

Finally—for human nature is but human nature, after all: he had been thinking of others so far, and he was now entitled to consider himself a little—he thought he would go along to Mr. Macleay's. When he arrived at the shop, he glanced in at the windows; but among the wild-cats, ptarmigan, black game, mallards, and what not, there was nothing to arrest his attention: it was a stag's head he had in his mind. He went inside; and his first sensation was one of absolute bewilderment—this crowded museum of birds, beasts, and fish—skarts, goosanders, sand-grouse, terns, eagles, ospreys, squirrels, foxes, big-snouted trout, harts, hinds, bucks, does, owls, kestrels, falcons, merlins, and every variety of the common gull shot by the all-pervading Cockney—staring, stuffed, silent,

they were a confusion to the eyes, and nowhere could he find his own, his particular, his precious stag. Alas! when Mr. Macleay was so kind as to take him behind into the workshop—which resembled a huge shambles, almost—and when from among the vast number of heads and horns lying and hanging everywhere around—the Strathaivron head was at last produced, Lionel was horribly shocked and disappointed. Was this, then, his trophy that he hoped to have hung up for the admiration of his friends and his own ecstatic contemplation—this twisted, shapeless, sightless lump of hide and hair, with a great jaw of discoloured teeth gleaming from under its flabby folds? It is true that here were the identical horns, for had he not gone lovingly over every tine of them?—but was this rag of a thing all that was left of the splendid stag he had beheld lying on the heather? However, Mr. Macleay speedily reassured him. He was shown the various processes and stages of the taxidermist's art, the amorphous mass of skin and hair gradually taking shape and substance until it stood forth in all its glory of flaming eye and proud nostril and branching antlers; and he was highly pleased to be told that this head he had got in Strathaivron was a

very fairly good one, as stags now go in the North. So, all his shopping being done, he set off again for the Station Hotel, where he got what he wanted in the shape of dinner, followed by a long and meditative smoke in the billiard-room, with visions appearing among the curls of blue vapour.

What the Highland Railway manages to do with the trains which it dispatches from Inverness at 10 P.M, and reproduces the next morning at Perth about 7, it is impossible for the mind of man to imagine; but it is not of much consequence so long as you are snugly ensconced in a sleeping-berth; and Lionel passed the night in profound oblivion. With the new day, however, these unavailing and torturing regrets began again; for now he felt himself more completely than before shut off from the friends he had left; and Strathaivron and all its associations and pursuits had grown distant, like a dream. He was lucky enough, on this southward journey, to get a compartment to himself; and here was an excellent opportunity for him to have sung a gay air or two; but it was not of music, nor of anything connected with the theatre, that he was thinking. He was much franker with himself now. He no longer tried to conceal from himself the cause of

this vague unrest, this useless looking back and longing, this curious down-hearted sense of solitariness. A new experience, truly, and a bewildering one! Indeed, he was ashamed of his own folly. For what was it that he wanted? A mere continuance of that friendly alliance and companionship which he had enjoyed all this time? Was he indulging a sort of sentimental misery simply because he could not walk down to the Aivron's banks, and talk to Miss Honnor, and watch the sun tracing threads of gold among her loosely-braided hair? If that was all, he might get out at the next station, make his way back to the beloved strath, and be sure that Honnor Cunyngham would welcome him just as of old, and allow him to carry her waterproof, or ask him to have a cast over the Junction Pool. He had no reason to fear any break in this friendship that had been formed. When he should see her in Brighton, she would be to him as she had been yesterday, when they said good-bye by the side of the river. And were not these the only possible relations between them; and ought he not to be proud and content that he could look forward to an enduring continuance of them?

Yes; but some man would be coming along and

marrying her; and where would he be then? What would become of this alliance, this friendly understanding—perhaps, even, some little interest on her part in his affairs—what would become of all these relations, then? It was the way of the world. Their paths would be divided—he would hear vaguely of her—perhaps see her name in the papers as being at a Drawing-Room or something of the kind. She would have forgotten all those long, still days by the Aivron and the Geinig; no echo would remain in her memory of "The Bonnie Earl o' Moray" as he had sung it for her, with all the passionate pathos of which he was capable; she would be a stranger—moving afar—one heard of only—a remembrance and no more. So the impalpable future was interwoven with those dreams and not too happy forecasts, as the train thundered on its way, along the wooded banks of the Allan Water and towards the winding Links of Forth.

But there was an alternative that would recur again and again to his fancy, though in rather a confused and breathless way. What if, in the very despair of losing her altogether, at the very moment of parting with her, he had made bold to claim this proud-spirited maiden all for himself?

Might not some such sudden and audacious proposal have been the very thing to appeal to her—the very thing to capture her? A challenge—a demand that she should submit—that she should come down from those serene heights of independence and yield herself a willing and gracious helpmeet and companion for life to this daring suitor: might not that have secured for him this wondrous prize? If she had any regard for him at all, she might have been startled into confession. A couple of words—there by the side of the Aivron—might have been enough. No theatrical professions nor mock homage, no kneeling at her feet or swearing by eternal stars; but a look into her eyes—a clasp of the hand—a single question? Something he had indeed meant to say to her, as they stood face to face there for the last time—something, he hardly knew what; and yet his hesitation had been but natural; he might have been hurried into saying too much; he dared not offend. Nay, even as he held her hand, he was unaware of the true state of his feeling towards her; it was this separation—this ever increasing distance between them—that had enabled him to understand.

And then again his mood changed into one of

bitter self-reproach and scorn. What miserable folly was this crying for the moon—this picturing of a marriage between the daughter of an ancient and wealthy house—one, too, who was unmistakably proud of her lineage — and a singer in comic opera! Not for nothing had he heard of the twin brothers Cunyngham who fell on Flodden Field. It is true that at the present time he and she mingled in the same society; for he was the pet and plaything of the hour, in the fashionable world; but he was not entirely blinded by that favour, he did not wholly mistake his position. And even supposing—a wild conjecture! —that she entertained an exceptional regard for him—that she could be induced to think of marrying him—would she be content that her husband remained on the stage, and painted his face every evening, and postured before the footlights? On the other hand, apart from the stage, what was he? —a mere nobody, not too well-instructed, having no particular gifts of wit or conversation, without even a well-filled purse—the meanest of qualifications—to recommend him. No doubt they might make a very pretty bargain between them: he might go to her and say—

"Let there be a sacrifice on both sides. I give

up the theatre—I give up the applause, the popularity, the opportunities of making pleasant friendships—all the agreeable things of a stage-life; and you on your part give up your pride of birth, and, it may be, something of your place in society. It is a surrender on both sides. Let our motto be 'All for love; and the world well lost.'" Yes, a very pretty bargain; but as he considered that he was now wandering into the region of romance—a region which he unhesitatingly despised as having no relation with the facts of the world—he withdrew from that futile and useless and idle speculation, and took to thinking of Miss Honnor Cunyngham as she actually was, and wondering over which of the Aivron pools the proud-featured fisher-maiden would be casting at this moment.

And here, again, as the hours crept by, was something of a more practical nature to remind him of the now far distant strath. In order to save him from the hurry of a twenty-minutes' railway-station dinner, Lady Adela had ordered a luncheon-basket to be packed for him, and her skill and forethought in this direction were unequalled, as many a little shooting party had joyfully discovered. When Lionel leisurely began to explore the contents of the basket he was proud

to think that it was under her own immediate supervision that these things had been put together for him. There was some kind of sentimental interest attaching to the chicken, and tongue, and galantine, to the salad and biscuits and cake and what not; and he knew that it was no servant who had thought of filling a small tin canister with peaches and grapes, even as he knew that only Lady Adela was aware of his preference for the particular dry Sillery, of which a half bottle here lay in its covering of straw. As he took out the things and placed them on the seat beside him, he could have imagined that a pair of very gentle hands had arranged that repast for him. Then from this much too sumptuous banquet his mind wandered away back to the simple fare that old Robert used to bring forth from the fishing-bag, when Miss Honnor had taken her place among the bracken. Again he was with her in that little dell away among the solitudes of the hills, with the murmur of the Geinig coming up to them from the chasm below. The sunlight flashed on the rippling burn at their feet; the leaves of the birches trembled, and no more than trembled, in the still air; the deep clear blue of the sky overhead told them to be in no

hurry—they would have to wait till the afternoon for clouds. In the perfect silence (for the humming of the bees in the heather was hardly a sound at all) he could hear every soft modulation of her voice—though, to be sure, it was not lovers' talk that passed between them. "Mr. Moore, won't you have the rest of this soda-water?" or "Yes, one of those brown biscuits, thank you," or "Please, Mr. Moore, will you crush those bits of paper together and bury them in a hole?—Nothing is so horrid as to come upon traces of a pic-nic on a hill-side or along a river." Already those long days of constant companionship seemed to be becoming remote. It was the black night-journey between Inverness and Perth that had severed that shining time from the dull and common-place hours he had now entered upon. He looked out of the window as the train thundered along—Preston—Wigan—Warrington—everywhere squalor, hurry, and noise, with a smoke-laden sky lowering over the sad and dismal country: different, indeed, from that other world he knew of, with its crimson slopes of heather, its laughing waters, its lonely solitudes in their noonday hush, the fair azure of the heavens becoming paler and paler towards the horizon until it touched the distant peaks and

shoulders of Assynt. "Muss aus dem Thal jetzt scheiden, wo alles Lust und Klang;" but at least the memory of it would remain with him—a gracious possession.

The long afternoon wore on; Crewe, Stafford, Lichfield, Tamworth went by, as things in a dream; for his thoughts were far away. Sometimes, it is true, he would rebel against this morbid, restless, useless regret that had got hold of him; and he would valiantly attack the newspapers, of which he had an ample supply; but somehow or another the grey columns would fade away, and in their place would come a picture of Strathaivron Lodge, and the valley, and the river, and of an upturned face smiling a last farewell to him as the waggonette rolled on. Was it really only yesterday that he had seen her—talked with her—taken her hand? A yesterday that seemed years away! A vision already growing pale.

Well, London came at last, and all the hurry and bustle of Euston Station; and when he had got his things put on the top of a hansom, and given his address to the driver, there was an end of dreams. No more dreams were possible in this great vortex of a city into which he was now plunged—a turbulent, bewildering, vast black hole

it seemed, and yet all afire with its blaze of windows and lamps. In Strathaivron the night was a gentle thing—it came stealing over the landscape as soft as sleep; it brought silence with it and a weight to tired eyes; it bade the woods be still; and to the lonely and darkened peaks of the hills it unveiled its canopy of trembling stars. But here there was no night—there was yellow fire, there were black phantoms unceasingly hurrying hither and thither, and a dull and constant roar more continuous than that of any sea. Tottenham Court Road after Strathaivron! But here at least was actuality; the time for sentimental sorrows, for dumb and hopeless regrets, was over and gone.

And who was the first to greet him on his return to London—who but Nina?—not in person, truly, but by a very graceful little message. The moment he went into his sitting-room his eyes fell on the tiny nosegay lying on the table; and when he took the card from the accompanying envelope, he knew whose handwriting he would find there. '*Welcome home—from Nina!*'—that was all; but it was enough to make him rather remorseful. Too much had he neglected his old comrade and ally; he had scarcely ever written to her; she had

been but little in his thoughts. Poor Nina!—it was a shame he should treat so faithful a friend so ill; he might have remembered her a little more, had not his head been stuffed with foolish fancies. Well, as soon as he had changed, and swallowed some bit of food, he would jump into a hansom and go along to the New Theatre: he would be too late to judge of Nina's *Grace Mainwaring* as a whole, but he would have a little chat with herself in the wings.

He was later in getting there than he had expected; indeed, as he made his way to the side of the stage, he discovered that his *locum tenens* had just been recalled and was singing for the second time the well-known serenade 'The Starry Night'—and very well he sang it, too, confound him! Lionel said to himself. And here was Nina, standing on a small platform at the top of a short ladder, and waiting until the passionate appeal of her sweetheart (in the garden without) should be finished. She did not know of the presence of the new comer. Lionel might have pulled her skirts, it is true, to apprise her of his being there; but that would not have been decorous; besides, he dared not distract her attention from the business of the stage. As soon as the last verse of the

serenade had been sung, with its recurring refrain—

Appear my sweet, and shame the skies,
That have no splendour
That have no splendour like thine eyes.

Nina—that is, *Grace Mainwaring*—carefully opened the casement at which she was supposed to be standing. A flood of moonlight—lime-light, rather—fell on her; but Lionel could not see how she looked the part, because her back was towards him. Very timidly *Grace Mainwaring* glanced this way and that, to make sure that no one could observe her; she took a rose from her hair, kissed it, and dropped it to her enraptured lover below. It was the end of the act. She had to come down quickly from the platform for the recall that resounded through the theatre; she did not chance to notice Lionel; she was led on and across the stage by *Harry Thornhill*, she bowing repeatedly and gracefully, he reserving his acknowledgment until he had handed her off. The reception both of them got was most gratifying; there could be no doubt of the sincerity of the applause of this crowded house.

"It seems to me I am not wanted here any more," Lionel said to himself. "Even Nina won't take any notice of the stranger."

The next moment Nina, who was coming across the stage, caught sight of him, and with a little cry of delight she ran towards him—yes, ran; for what cared she about carpenters and scene-shifters?—and caught both his hands in hers.

"Ah, Leo!" she cried, with glad-shining eyes. "Oh, so brown you are!—a hunter!—you are from the forests! And to-day you arrive—and already at the theatre—did you hear the duet—no? Ah, it is good to see you again, after so long!—I could laugh and cry together, it is such a joy to see you—and see you looking so well——"

"I say, Nina," he said, "that fellow Doyle sings tremendously well—he's ever so much improved—they'll be wanting him to take my place altogether, and sending me off into the country."

"You, Leo!" she said, with a merry laugh, and still she regarded him with those delighted, welcoming eyes. "Ah, yes, it is likely! Ah, you will see what reception they will give you on Monday. Yes, it is in all the papers already—everywhere I see it; but come—Miss Girond and I, we have Miss Burgoyne's room for the present—you can wait for a few minutes, then I come out to talk to you."

Lionel (feeling very much like a stranger in this

place) followed her into Miss Burgoyne's room, where he found Mlle. Girond only too ready to throw away the French novel she was reading. Nina had to disappear into the dressing-room; but this small boy-officer in the gay uniform, with his or her pretty gesticulation and charm of broken English, was quite willing to entertain Mr. Moore, though at times she would forget all about him, and walk across to the full-length mirror, and twist her small moustache. She chatted to him now and again; she returned to the mirror to touch her eyebrows or adjust her sash; she walked about, or flicked the dust from her shining Wellingtons with a silk handkerchief; again she contemplated herself in the glass, and lightly sang—

En débordant de Saint-Malo
Nos longs avirons battaient l'eau!

Then she was called away for the beginning of the last act; and Nina, having made the change necessary for her next appearance, came out from the dressing-room and sat down.

"Oh, you are wicked, Leo," she said, as she contentedly crossed her hands in her lap, and looked at the young man with those friendly eyes, "that you stayed away so long. I wished to sing

the duet with you—but no—you begin Monday—and Miss Burgoyne comes back Monday——"

"Does she? I thought she was ordered a long rest."

Nina laughed.

"She sees in the papers that you come back—it is to be a great occasion—she says to herself, 'Will he sing with that Italian girl? No! Let my throat be well or ill, I am going back;' and she is coming, Leo. Never mind; I am to have the part of *Clara;* is it not an advancement? And everything is so much more comfortable now; Miss Girond has taken a room with Mrs. Grey; then we go home always together; and she has the use of the piano——"

"Miss Ross, please!" called a voice at the door.

"All right!" she called in reply.

"The chorus is on, Miss."

"All right!"

"Ah," she continued, "it is so good to see you back, Leo; yes, yes; London was a stranger city when you were away—there was no one. And it is all you I have to thank, Leo, for my introduction here and my good fortune——"

"Oh, nonsense, Nina!" he said. "What else could I have done? It isn't you who ought to

thank me—it's Lehmann: I consider him precious lucky to have got a substitute for Miss Burgoyne so easily. So Miss Burgoyne is coming back on Monday?"

"Yes," said Nina, as she went to the door. "Shall I see you again, Leo, to-night?"

"Oh, I'm coming to hear you sing 'Now to the dance,'" he said, as he followed her out into the corridor, and ascended with her into the wings.

This was a busy act for Nina; and the next time he had an opportunity of talking with her was after she had dressed herself in her bridal robes and was come up ready to go on the stage. Nina looked a little self-conscious when she first encountered him in this attire; perhaps she was afraid of his contrasting her appearance with that of Miss Burgoyne. If he did, it was certainly not to Nina's disadvantage. No; Nina was much more distinguished-looking and refined than the pert little doll-like bride represented by Miss Burgoyne: she wore the gorgeous costume of flowered white satin with ease and grace; and her portentous white wig, with its feathered brilliants and strings of pearls, seemed to add a greater depth and softness and mild lustre to her dark, expressive eyes. For an instant, as she came up to him,

those beautiful, liquid eyes were turned to the ground.

"I did not choose anything, Leo," she said, modestly; "I have had to copy Miss Burgoyne."

"Well, there's a difference somehow, Nina," said he; "and I think Miss Burgoyne had better begin and copy you."

For a swift instant she raised her eyes: she was more than pleased. But she said nothing—indeed, she had now to go on the stage. And if he had contrasted her appearance favourably with that of Miss Burgoyne, he was now inclined to give a similar verdict with regard to her acting. It certainly wanted the self-confidence of long experience, and also the emphasis and exaggeration of comedy-opera; it was not nearly impudent enough for the upper gallery; but it was graceful and natural to a degree that surprised him. As for her voice, that was incomparably better than Miss Burgoyne's; it was a fresh, sympathetic, finely modulated voice that had been uninjured either by excessive training or excessive work. Lionel was quite proud of his *protegée;* unseen, here in the wings, he could applaud as loudly as any; if Nina did not hear, she must have been deaf. And when she came off at the end of the act—

or rather, immediately after the recall, which was as enthusiastic as the soul of actor or actress could desire—there was no stint to his praise; and Nina's heartfelt pleasure on hearing this warm commendation shone through all her stage make-up. He asked if he should wait to act as escort to Miss Girond and herself; but Nina said no; Miss Girond and she went home every night by themselves in a four-wheeled cab; she knew he must be tired after his long journey; and he must go away and get to bed at once. So Lionel shook hands with her; and left the theatre; and walked carelessly and absently home to his lodgings in Piccadilly.

Well, he was glad to find his old friend and comrade Nina getting on so well, and so proud of her success, and looking so charming in her new part; and he guessed that she must have written to the grumbling old Pandiani, and sent photographs of herself as *Grace Mainwaring* to Andrea and Carmela and her other Neapolitan friends. But it was not of Nina that he thought long, as he lay in the easy-chair, and smoked, and listened to the heavy murmur of the streets without. He had not got used to London yet. The theatre seemed to him a great, glaring thing; the lime-

light an impertinent sham; even the applause of the delighted audience somehow brutal and offensive. There was no repose, no reticence, no self-respect and modesty about the whole affair; it was all too violent; a fanfaronade; a coarse and ostentatious make-believe, that seemed a kind of insult to a quiet mind. He turned away from it altogether. His fancies had fled to the North again; the long railway-journey was annihilated; again he was driving out to the still and beautiful valley, where those kind friends were standing at the door of the Lodge, fluttering a white welcome to him. He goes down the steep hill-side; he crosses the stream at the Horse's Drink; he reaches the hall-door, and is shaking hands with this one and that. And if the tall, proud maiden with the fine forehead and the clear calm hazel eyes is not among this group, be sure she will be here in the evening, to add her greeting to the rest. Oh, to think of that next morning—the sweet air blowing down from the hills—the silver lights among the purple clouds—the Aivron swinging along its gravelly bed, a deep clear bronze where the sunlight strikes the shallows! Further and further into the solitudes those two idly wander—away from human ken—until the dogs

in the kennels are no longer heard, nor is there even a black-cock crowing in the woods: nothing but the hum of the bees, and the whisper of the birch-branches, and the hushed low thunder of the Geinig falls. He could almost hear it now: or was not the continuous murmur that dazed and dinned his ears a sadly different sound—the muffled roar of cabs and carriages along Piccadilly, bearing home this teeming population from the blare and glare of the crowded theatres? A different sound indeed! He had come into another world; and the Aivron and Geinig, far away, were alone with the darkness and the stars.

CHAPTER V.

A MAGNANIMOUS RIVAL.

That Monday night at the New Theatre was a great occasion; for although there were a few people (themselves not of much account, perhaps) who went about saying there was no one in London, an enormous house welcomed back to the stage those well-known favourites, Miss Burgoyne and Mr. Lionel Moore. And what had become of the Aivron and the Geinig now?—their distant murmurs were easily drowned in the roar of enthusiasm with which the vast audience—a mass of orange-hued faces they seemed across the footlights—greeted the prima donna and the popular young baritone. Nina was here also, in her subordinate part. And all that Miss Burgoyne could do, on the stage and off the stage, to attract his attention, did not hinder Lionel from watching, with the most affectionate interest, the manner in

which his *protegée*, his old comrade Nina, was acquitting herself. *Clara* was perhaps a little bit too eager and anxious; she anticipated her cues; her parted lips seemed to repeat what was being said to her; lights and shadows of expression chased each other over the mobile features and brightened or darkened her eloquent eyes; and in her passages with *Grace Mainwaring* she was most effusive, though that other young lady maintained a much more matter-of-fact demeanour.

"Capital, Nina! Very well done!" Lionel exclaimed (to himself) in the wings. "You're on the right track. It is easier to tone down than to brace up. Don't be afraid—keep it going—you'll grow business-like soon enough——"

Here *Clara* had to come tripping off the stage, and Lionel had to go on; he had no opportunity of speaking to her until the end of the act, when they chanced to meet in the long glazed corridor.

"You're a bit nervous to-night, Nina," he said, in a kindly way.

"But so as to be bad?" she said, quickly and anxiously.

"It was very well done indeed—it was splendid—but you almost take too much pains. Most girls with a voice like yours would merely sing

a part like that and think the management was getting enough. I suppose you don't know yourself that you keep repeating what the other person is saying to you—as if he wasn't getting on fast enough—— "

She paused for a second.

"Yes, I understand—I understand what you mean," she said rather slowly; then she continued in her usual way: "But to-night, Leo, I am anxious—oh, there are so many things!—this is the first time I act with Miss Burgoyne; and I wish them not to say I am a stick—for your sake, Leo—you brought me here—I must do what I can—— "

"Oh, Nina, you don't half value yourself!" he said. "You think far too little of yourself. You're a most wonderful creature to find in a theatre. I consider that Lehmann is under a deep obligation to me for giving him the chance of engaging you. By the way, have you heard what he means to do on Sunday week?"

"No—not at all!"

"Saturday week is the 400th night," he continued; "and to celebrate it, Lehmann is going to give the principal members of the company, and a few friends, I suppose, a dinner at the Star

and Garter at Richmond. Haven't you heard?—but of course he'll send you a card of invitation. The worst of it is that it is no use driving down at this time of the year: I suppose we shall have to get there just as we please, and meet in the room; but I don't know how all the proper escorts are to be arranged. I was thinking, Nina, I could take you and Miss Girond down, if you will let me."

There was a bright, quick look of pleasure in Nina's eyes—but only for an instant.

"No, no, Leo," she said, with lowered lashes. "That is not right. Miss Burgoyne and you are the two principal people in the theatre—you are on the stage equals—off the stage also you are her friend—you must take her to Richmond, Leo."

"Miss Burgoyne?"——

But here the door of Miss Burgoyne's room was suddenly opened, and the voice of the young lady herself was heard, in unmistakeably angry tones:

"Oh, bother your headache! I suppose it was your headache made you split my blue jacket in two, and I suppose it was your headache made you smash my brooch last night—I wonder what some women were born for!"—And therewithal

the charming *Grace Mainwaring* made her appearance; and not a word—hardly a look—did the indignant small lady choose to bestow on either Lionel or Nina as she brushed by them on her way up to the wings.

Yes, here he was in the theatre again, with all its trivial distractions and interests, and also its larger excitements, and ambitions, and rewards, not the least of which was the curious fascination he found in holding a great audience hushed and enthralled, listening breathlessly to every far-reaching, passionate note. Then his reappearance on the stage brought him a renewal of all the friendly little attentions and hospitalities that had been interrupted by his leaving for Scotland; for if certain of his fashionable acquaintance were still away at their country-houses, there were plenty of others who had returned to town. Club-life had begun again, too. But most of all, at this time, Lionel was disposed to enjoy that quiet and gentle companionship with Nina, which was so simple and frank and unreserved. He could talk to her freely, on all subjects save one—and that he was trying to put away from himself, in these altered circumstances. He and she had a community of interests; there was never any lack

of conversation—whether he was down in Sloane Street, drinking tea and trying over new music with her, or walking with Miss Girond and her in to the theatre, through the now almost leafless Green Park. Sometimes, when she was grown petulant and fractious, he had to scold her into good-humour; sometimes she had seriously to remonstrate with him; but it was all given and taken in good part. He was never embarrassed or anxious in her society: he was happy, and content, and careless, as she appeared to be also. He did not trouble to invent any excuse for calling upon her; he went down to Sloane-street just whenever he had a spare half-hour or hour; and if the morning was bright, or even passable (for it was November now, and even a tolerable sort of day was welcome), and if Miss Girond did not wish to go out or had some other engagement, Nina and he would set off for a stroll by themselves, up into Kensington Gardens, it might be, or along Piccadilly, or through the busy crowds of Oxford-street; while they looked at the shops and the passers-by, and talked about the theatre and the people in it, or about old days in Naples. There was no harm; and they thought no harm. Sometimes he could hear her hum to herself a

fragment of one of the old familiar canzoni—"Antoniella Antonià!" or "Voca, voca, ncas' a mano" so light-hearted was she; and occasionally they said a word to each other in Neapolitanese—but this was seldom, for Nina considered the practice to be most reprehensible. What she had chiefly to take him to task for, however, was his incurable and inordinate extravagance—especially wherever she was concerned.

"Leo, you think it is a compliment?" she said to him, earnestly. "No, not at all; I am sorry. Why should you buy for me this, that, whatever strikes your eye, and no matter the price? I have everything I desire. Why to me?—why, if you must give, why not to your cousin you tell me of, who is so kind to the sick children, in boarding them in the country? There, now, is something worthy, something good, something to be praised——"

"Oh, preach away, Nina!" he answered, with a laugh. "But I've contributed to Francie's funds until she won't take anything more from me—not at present. But why do you always talk about saving and saving? You are an artist, Nina, and you put such value on money!"

"But an artist grows old, Leo," she said.

"Perhaps you have been saving a little yourself, Nina?" he said, at a venture.

"Oh, yes, I have, Leo, a little," she answered, rather shamefacedly.

"What for?" he made bold to ask.

"Oh, how do I know?" she said, with downcast eyes. "Many things might happen: is it not safer? No, Leo, you must not say I love money for itself; it is not fair to me; but—but if a dear friend is ill—if a doctor says to him 'suspend all work, and go away to Capri, to Algeria, to Eg—Egippo'—is it right?—and perhaps he has been indiscreet—he has been too generous to all his companions—he is in need—then you say 'Here, take mine—it is between friends.' Then you are proud to have money, are you not?"

"I'm afraid, Nina, that's what they call a parable," said he, darkly. "But I am sure of this, that if that person were to be taken ill, and were so very poor, and were to go to Nina for help, I don't think he would have to fear any refusal. And then, as you say, Nina, you would be proud to have the money—just as I know you would be ready to give it."

It was rarely that Nina blushed, but now her pretty, pale face fairly burned with conscious

pleasure; and he hardly dared to look, yet he fancied there was something of moisture in the long, dark lashes; while she did not speak for some seconds. Perhaps he had been too bold in interpreting her parable?

Yes, there was no doubt that this spoilt favourite of the public, who lived amid the excitements, the flatteries, the gratifications of the moment, with hardly a thought of the future, was dreadfully extravagant, though it was rarely on himself that he lavished his reckless expenditure. Nina's protests were of no avail; whenever he saw anything pretty, or odd, or interesting, that he thought would please her, it was purchased there and then, to be given to her on the first opportunity. One day he was going through Vigo-street, and noticed in a shop-window a pair of old-fashioned, silver-gilt loving-cups—those that interclasp; and forthwith he went in and bought them: "I'll take those; how much are they?" being his way of bargaining. In the afternoon he carried them down to Sloane-street.

"Here, Nina, I've brought you a little present; and I'll have to show you how to use it, or you would never guess what it is for."

When he unrolled his pretty gift out of the

pink tissue-paper Nina threw up her hands in despair.

"Oh, it is too much of a folly!" she exclaimed. "Why do you do it, Leo! What is the use of old silver to me!"

"Well, it's nice to look at," said he. "And it will help to furnish your house when you get married, Nina."

"Ah, Leo," said she, "if you would only think about yourself! It is always to-day, to-morrow, with you: never the coming years——"

"Yes, I know all about that," he interposed. "Now I'm going to show you how these are used. They're loving-cups, you know, Nina——"

"Loving-cups?" she repeated, rather timidly.

"Yes; and I will show you how the ceremony is performed. Now, will you get me some lemonade, Nina, and a little of the vermouth that I sent to Mrs. Grey?"

She went and got these things for him; and when she returned he poured into one of the tiny goblets about a teaspoon of the vermouth, filling it up with the lemonade; then he put the other cup on the top of this one, so that they formed a continuous vessel; he shook the contents; then he separated the cups, leaving about half the liquid

in each, and one of them he handed to Nina, retaining the other.

"We drink at the same time, Nina—with any kind of wishes you like."

She glanced towards him—and then shyly lowered her eyes—as she raised the small cup to her lips. What were her wishes? Perhaps he did not care to know; perhaps she would not have cared to tell.

"You see, it is a simple ceremony, Nina," he said, as he put the little goblet on the table again. "But at the same time it is very confidential. I mean, you wouldn't ask everybody to go through it with you—it would hardly, for example, be quite circumspect for you to ask any young man you didn't know very well——"

"Leo!"

The sound of her voice startled him: there were tears of indignation in it: he looked up and found she had grown suddenly pale.

"You," she said, with quivering lips, "you and I, Leo—we have drunk together out of these—and you think I allow any one else—any one living in the world—to drink out of them after that?—I would rather have them dashed to pieces and thrown into the sea!"

Her vehemence surprised him—and might have set any other person thinking; but he was used to Nina's proud and wayward moods; so he merely went on to tell her that there was nothing, after all, so very solemn in the ceremony of drinking from a loving-cup; and then he asked her whether she ought not to call Miss Girond, for it was about time they were going down to the theatre.

Of course the forthcoming dinner that Mr. Lehmann was about to give at the Star and Garter created quite a stir behind the scenes, where the routine of life is much more monotonous than the people imagine who sit in the stalls and regard the antics of the merry folk on the stage. There were all kinds of rumours and speculations as to who was going with whom, as to the number and quality of the visitors, and as to the possibility of the manager presenting each of his lady guests with a little souvenir in honour of the occasion. So when Lionel was summoned to Miss Burgoyne's room one evening, he was not surprised to find her begin to talk of the following Sunday.

"Will you make yourself some tea, Mr. Moore?" she said, from the inner room. "There's some cake on the top of the piano. Then you can bring

a chair to the curtain, and I'll talk to you—for I'm not quite finished yet."

He drew a chair to the little opening in the curtain, where he could hear what she had to say, and answer, without any indiscreet prying.

"I am at your service, Miss Grace," said he, lightly.

"How are you going down to Richmond on Sunday?" she asked at once.

"By train, I suppose."

There was a moment's silence—perhaps she was waiting for him to ask a similar question.

"Lord Denysfort is going to drive down," said the voice in the inner room.

"Lord Denysfort!" he said, contemptuously. "What she is the attraction now? I don't like that kind of thing: it gets the theatre a bad name. If I were Lehmann, I wouldn't have a single stranger allowed in the wings."

"Not unless they were your own friends," said the unseen young lady, complacently. "Now I know you're scowling. But I believe you are quite wrong. Lord Denysfort is simply a business-acquaintance of Mr. Lehmann's—there are money-matters between them, and that kind of thing; and when he was asked to be present at the

dinner, it was quite natural he should offer to drive some of us down. You have no particular detestation of lords, have you? What has become of the tall, handsome young man you brought to us at Henley—the lazy man—and didn't he come to the theatre one night?"

"Lord Rockminster?—he is in Scotland still, I believe."

"Somebody ought to put fireworks in his coat-tail pockets; but he's awfully good-looking—he's just frightfully handsome. He quite fluttered me."

"I say, Miss Burgoyne," Lionel interposed, quickly, "there's a sister-in-law of his coming to town shortly, on her way to Brighton—a Miss Cunyngham—and I should like to have her mother and herself come behind for a little while, some night they were at the theatre—it is interesting to those people, you know——"

"You are the one who would have no strangers in the wings!" said the voice.

"And I want you to be civil to them——"

"Tea and cake? All right. But you haven't told me how you are going down to Richmond."

"Yes, I have. I'm going down by train, most likely."

"Oh, by train. I suppose I ought to accept Lord Denysfort's invitation."

"What's the good of driving at this time of year?" he asked. "It will be pitch dark."

"There will be a full moon, they say."

"You won't see it because of the fog. In fact, the whole thing is a mistake. The dinner should have been given in London."

"Oh, I think it will be great fun dining at a half-deserted hotel—it will be ghostly—and I'm going out on the terrace if it is as black as midnight."

"And what are you going to do with your gallant warrior—with the furious fire-eater who wanted to bring my humble career to a premature end?"

"I don't know whom you mean," said the voice, but with no great decision.

"You don't remember saving my life, then?" he asked. "Have you forgotten the duel that was to have been fought before I went to Scotland; and how you stepped in to protect me? If it hadn't been for you, I might have fallen on the gory field of battle——"

"It's all very well for you to mock," said she, "but there's nothing that young man wouldn't do for my sake; and I don't see anything to laugh at

in true esteem and affection. They're too rare nowadays. I know one or two gentlemen who might be improved by a little more devotion and—and chivalry. But it's all *persiflage* nowadays. Everything is *connu*——"

"Behind the scenes, perhaps; but it's different when you import the fresh, the ingenuous element from the outer world," said he (but what interest had he in the discussion?—he did not wear his heart on his sleeve for Miss Burgoyne to peck at). "Aren't you going to take Mr. Miles down with you?"

"Poor Percy!" said the now muffled voice (perhaps she had a pin in her teeth, or perhaps she was still further touching up her lips), "I suppose he would come if he were invited; but he doesn't know any of them."

"Why don't you ask Lehmann for an invitation for him?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Moore?" demanded the voice—sharply enough now.

"Oh, nothing."

"I consider you are very impertinent. Why should I ask for an invitation for Mr. Miles? What would that imply? Do you suppose I particularly wish him to be there?"

"Oh, I didn't mean to offend," Lionel said, quite humbly. "Only—you see—the other night you showed me that ingenious dodge of covering the ring you wear with a bit of white india-rubber—and—and I thought it might be an engagement ring—worn on that finger—— "

"Then you're quite wrong, Mr. Clever," said the voice. "That ring was given me by a very dear friend, a very, very dear friend—I won't tell you whether a he or a she—and it fits that finger; but all the same I don't want the public to think I am engaged. So there—for your wonderful guessing!"

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," said he; "I didn't mean to be inquisitive."

But at this moment the intervening curtains were thrown open, and here was *Grace Mainwaring*, in full panoply of white satin, and pearls, and powdered hair. She was followed by her maid. She went to the long mirror in this larger room, and began to put the finishing touches to the set of her costume and also to her make-up. Then she told Jane to go and get the inner room tidied; and when the maid had disappeared, she turned to the young baritone.

"Mr. Moore," said she, rather pointedly, "you are not very communicative."

"In what way?"

"I understand you are going to take Miss Ross and Miss Girond down to Richmond on Sunday: I don't see myself why you should conceal it."

"I never thought of concealing it!" he exclaimed, with a little surprise. "Why should a trifling arrangement like that be concealed—or mentioned either?"

Miss Burgoyne regarded herself in the mirror again, and touched her white wig here and there, and the black beauty-spots on her cheek and chin.

"I have been told," she remarked, rather scornfully, "that gentlemen are fond of the society of chorus-girls—I suppose they enjoy a certain freedom there that they don't meet elsewhere."

"Neither Miss Ross nor Miss Girond is a chorus-girl," he said—though he wasn't going to lose his temper over nothing.

"They have both sung in the chorus," she retorted, snappishly.

"That is neither here nor there," he said. "Why, what does it matter how we go down, when we shall all meet there on a common footing? It was an obviously simple arrangement—Sloane Street is on my way, whether I go by road or rail——"

"Oh, pray don't make any apology to *me*—*I* am not interested in the question," she observed, in a most lofty manner, as she still affected to be examining her dress in the mirror.

"I wasn't making any apology to anybody," he said, bluntly.

"Or explanation," she continued, in the same tone. "You seem to have a strange fancy for foreigners, Mr. Moore; and I suppose they are glad to be allowed to practise talking with any one who can speak decent English."

"Nina—I mean, Miss Ross—is an old friend of mine," he said, just beginning to chafe a little. "It is a very small piece of courtesy that I should offer to see her safely down to Richmond, when she is a stranger, with hardly any other acquaintance in London——"

"But pray don't make any excuse to *me*—what have *I* to do with it?" Miss Burgoyne said, sweetly. And then, as she gathered up her long train and swung it over her arm, she added: "Will you kindly open the door for me, Mr. Moore?" And therewith she passed out, and along the corridor, and up into the wings—he attending her, for he also was wanted in this scene.

Well, Miss Burgoyne might drive down to

Richmond with Lord Denysfort or with any one else; he was not going to forsake Nina. On the afternoon appointed, just as it was dark, he called at the house in Sloane Street, and found the two young ladies ready, with nothing but their bonnets to put on. Both of them, he thought, were very prettily dressed, if Nina's costume had a somewhat severer grace; and, indeed, that rather comported with Nina's demeanour towards this little French chatter-box, whom she seemed to regard with a kind of grave and young-matronly consideration and forbearance. When they had got into the brougham which was waiting outside for them, and had started away for Putney Bridge, it was Mlle. Girond who was merry and excited and talkative: Nina only listened, in good-humoured amusement. Mlle. Girond had never been to Richmond; but she had heard of it; she knew all about the beautiful view, and the terrace overlooking the river; and she was promising herself the romance and charm of a stroll in the moonlight.

"I don't see much sign of that full moon as yet," Lionel said to her, peering through the window of the brougham, "but I suppose the glare of the gas-lamps would hide it in any case. However, there's a good deal of fog always along the

Thames at this time of year: don't be disappointed, Miss Girond, if you have to remain indoors. Indeed, it is far too cold to go wandering about among statues in the moonlight."

"And if in the dark, they will be all the more mysterieuz, do you not think?" said Miss Girond, eagerly. "And there will be surprises—perhaps a laugh, perhaps a shriek—if you run against some one?"

"Oh, no, I am not going to allow anything of that kind," said he. "I have to look after you young ladies, and you must conduct yourselves with the strictest decorum."

"Yes, for Nina," Miss Girond cried, gaily. "That is for Nina—for me, no! I will have some amusement; or I will run away. Who gave you control of me, Monsieur? I thank you; but I do not wish it."

"Estelle!" said Nina, in tones of grave reproach.

"Ah!" said the wilful young lady, and she put out the tips of her fingers as though she would shake away from her these too serious companions. "You have become English, Nina. Very well. If I have no more gay companion, I go out and seek a statue—I beckon to him—I defy

him—ah! he freezes me—he nods his head—it is the Commendatore!" And then she sang, in portentous bass notes—

"Don Giovanni, a cenar teco
M' invitasti—è son venuto!"

Lionel let down the window.

"Do you see that, Miss Girond?"

Far away above the blue mists and the jet-black trees (for they were out in the country by this time) hung a small opaque disc of dingy orange.

"It is the moon, Leo!" cried Nina. "Ah, but so dull!"

"That is the fog lying over the low country," he said, "it may be clearer when we get to the top of the hill. It is to be hoped so, at all events. Fancy a theatrical company going out to a rustic festivity, and not provided with a better moon than that!"

However, when they eventually reached the Star and Garter, they had forgotten about the moon and the aspect of the night; for here were the wide steps and the portico all ablaze with a friendly yellow glow; and just inside stood Mr. Lehmann—with the most shining shirt-front ever beheld—receiving his guests as they arrived.

Here, too, was Lord Denysfort, a feeble-looking young man, with huge ears and no chin to speak of, who, however, had shown some sense in engaging a professional whip to drive the four-in-hand down through the fog. Of course there was a good deal of bustle and hurry and confusion—friends anxious about the non-arrival of other friends and so forth—in the midst of which Lionel said to his two companions—

"Dinner will be a long time yet. The ladies who have driven down will be making themselves beautiful for another quarter of an hour. Suppose we go out on the balcony, and see whether any of Miss Girond's statues are visible."

They agreed to this, for they had not taken off their cloaks; so he led them along the hall and round by a smaller passage to a door which he opened; they got outside, and found themselves in the hushed, still night. Below them, on the wide terrace, they could make out the wan grey plaster pillars and pediments and statues, among the jet-black shrubs; but beyond that all was chaos; the river and the wooded valley were shrouded in a dense mist, pierced only here and there by a small orange ray—some distant window or lamp. They wandered down the wide steps;

they crossed to the parapet; they gazed into that great unknown gulf, in which they could descry nothing but one or two spectral black trees, their topmost branches coming up into the clearer air. Then they walked along to the southern end of the terrace; and here they came in sight of the moon—a far-distant world on fire it seemed to be, especially when the sombre golden radiance touched a passing tag of cloud and changed it into lurid smoke. All the side of the vast building looking towards them was dark—save for one window that burned red.

"Is that where we dine?" asked Nina, as they returned.

"Oh, no," Lionel answered. "Our room is at the end of the passage by which we came out—I suppose the shutters are shut. I fancy that is the coffee-room."

"I am going to have a peep in," Mlle. Girond said, as they ascended the steps again; and when they had reached the balcony, she went along to the window, leaving her companions behind, for they did not share in this childish curiosity. But the next moment little *Capitaine Crépin* came back, in a great state of excitement.

"Come, come, come!" she said, breathlessly.

"Ah, the poor young gentleman—all alone!—my heart feels for him—Mr. Moore, it is piteous—— "

"Well, what have you discovered now!" said Lionel—indifferently, for he was getting hungry.

"Come and see—come and see! All alone—no one to say a word—— "

Lionel and Nina followed their eager guide along the dark balcony, until they had got near the brilliant red window. They looked in. The room was bright with crimson-shaded lamps, and its solitary occupant they made out clearly enough: it was Mr. Percival Miles—in evening dress, standing before the fireplace, gazing into the coals, his hands in his pockets.

"Ah," said Nina, as she quickly drew back, "that is the young gentleman who sometimes waits for Miss Burgoyne, is it not, Leo? And he is all by himself? It is hard."

"You think it is hard, Nina?" Lionel said, turning to her, as the three spies simultaneously withdrew.

"Oh, yes, yes!" Nina exclaimed.

"Well, you see," continued Lionel, as he opened the glass door to let his companions re-enter the hotel, "an outsider who comes skylarking after an actress, and finds her surrounded by her profes-

sional friends and her professional interests, has to undergo a good deal of tribulation. That poor fellow has come down here to dine all by himself, merely to be near her. But mind you, it was that same fellow who wanted to kill me—— "

"He, kill you!" Nina said scornfully. "You allowed him to live—yes?"

"But I don't bear any malice. No, I don't. I'm going to make that boy just the very happiest young man there is in the kingdom of Great Britain this evening—— "

"Ah, I know, I know!" exclaimed Nina, delightedly.

"Oh, no, you don't know. You don't know anything about it. What you and Miss Girond have got to do now is to go into the cloak-room and leave your things, and afterwards I'll meet you in the dining-room—— "

"Yes, but you are going to Mr. Lehmann!" said Nina, with a laugh. "I do not know?—yes, I do know. Ah, that is generous of you, Leo—that is noble."

"Noble?—trash!" he said; and he hurried these young people along to the disrobing room and left them there. Then he went to the Manager, who was still in the hall.

"I say," he began, without more ado, "there's a young friend of mine in this hotel whom I wish you'd invite to dine with us."

The Manager looked rather startled—then hesitated—then stroked his waxed moustache.

"I—I presume a gentleman-friend?"

"Yes, of course," said Lionel, angrily. "It's a Percival Miles—why, you must have heard of Sir Barrington Miles—and this is his eldest son, though he's quite a young fellow——"

"Oh, very well; oh, yes, certainly!" said Mr. Lehmann, apparently much relieved. "Will you ask him?"

"Well, no, I can't exactly," Lionel said. "But I will send him a formal note in your name—'Mr. Lehmann presents his compliments'—may I?"

"All right; but dinner will be served almost directly. Would you mind telling the waiters to lay another cover?"

About five minutes thereafter, when the company had swarmed into the dining-room—most of them chatting and laughing, but the more business-like looking for their allotted places at table—Mr. Percival Miles put in an appearance, very shy and perhaps a little bewildered, for he knew not to whom he owed this invitation. Lionel had got a

seat for him between Mlle. Girond and Mr. Carey, the musical conductor; if he could, and if he had dared, he would have placed him next Miss Burgoyne; but Miss Burgoyne was at the head of the table, between Lord Denysfort and Mr. Lehmann—besides, that fiery young lady might have taken sudden cause of offence. As it was, the young gentleman could gaze upon her from afar; and she had bowed to him—with some surprise clearly showing in her face—just as their eyes had met on his coming into the room. Lionel was next to Nina; he had arranged that.

It was a protracted banquet, and a merry one withal; there was a perfect Babel of noise; and the excellent old custom of drinking healths with distant friends was freely adopted. Miss Girond did her best to amuse the good-looking boy whom she had been instrumental in rescuing from his solitary dinner in the coffee-room; but he did not respond as he ought to have done; from time to time he glanced wistfully towards the head of the table, where Miss Burgoyne was gaily chatting with Lord Denysfort. As for Nina, Nina was very quiet, but very much interested, as her dark, expressive eyes eloquently showed.

"It is so beautiful, Leo," she said. "Every one

looks so well: is it the light reflected from the table?" And then she said in a lower tone: "Do you see Miss Burgoyne, Leo? She is acting all the time. She is acting to the whole table."

"That Albanian jacket of hers is gorgeous enough anyway," Lionel responded: he was not much interested—apparently—in the question of Miss Burgoyne's behaviour.

When dinner had been some little time over, the women-folk went away and got wraps and shawls, and the whole company passed outside, the men lighting their cigars at the top of the steps. The heavens overhead were now perfectly clear; the moonlight shone full on the long terrace, with its parapets, and pedestals, and plaster figures; while all the world below was shut away in a dense fog. Indeed, as the various groups idly walked about or stood and talked—their shadows sharply cut as out of ebony on the white stone—the whole scene was most extraordinary; for it appeared as though these people were the sole occupants of some region in cloud-land—a clear-shining region raised high above the forgotten earth.

"Lehmann is lucky," Lionel said to Nina. "I thought his moonlight effect was going to be a failure."

Miss Girond came up in an eager and excited fashion.

"Nina!"

"What is it, Estelle?"

"Monsieur of the pretty face," she said, in a whisper, "oh, so sad he was all dinner!—regarding Miss Burgoyne, and she coquetting, oh, frightful, frightful!—but it is all right now—he was at the door when we come out—he takes her hand—'How you do, Miss Burgoyne?'—'Oh, how you do, Mr. Miles?'—and he leads her away before she can go to any one else. And there—away down there—do you see them? He has compensation, do you think?" She drew Nina a little aside, and sang into her ear—

"*—Ce soir, as-tu vu*
La fille à notre maître,
D'un air résolu
Guettant à sa fenêtre?
. Eh bien! qu'en dis tu?
—Je dis que j'ai tout vu,
Mais je n'ai rien cru;
Je l'aime, je l'aime,
Je l'aime quand même!".

—and then she broke into a malicious laugh.

"What are you two conspiring about now?" Lionel asked—from the bench on which he had

carelessly seated himself, the better to enjoy his cigar.

"You must know the consequence of doing a good action, Leo," Nina said to him. "Do you see the black bushes—yonder—and the two figures? Estelle says it is Miss Burgoyne and the young gentleman who would have been all alone but that you interceded. Is he not owing a great deal to you?"

"Well, Nina, if there is any gratitude in woman's bosom, Miss Burgoyne ought to be indebted to me too. She has got her pretty dear. I dare say he would have managed to procure a little interview with her, in some surreptitious way, in any case —I dare say that was his intention in coming down; but now that he is one of the party, one of the guests, she can talk to him before every one. And since I have been the means of bringing the pair of turtle-doves together, I hope they're happy."

"Ah, Leo, you do not understand," Nina said to him—for Miss Girond was now talking to Mr. Carey, who had come up.

"I don't understand what?"

"You do not understand Miss Burgoyne," said Nina.

"What don't I understand about her, then?"

Nina shook her head.

"Why should I say? You will not believe. Perhaps she is grateful to you for bringing in that young man—yes, perhaps—but if she would rather have yourself to go and talk with her and be her companion before all those people? Oh, you do not believe? No! you are too modest—as she is vain, and jealous. All during the dinner she was playing coquette, openly, for every one to see: Estelle says it was to pique the young man who came from the other room: no, Leo, it was not—it was meant for you!"

"Oh, nonsense, Nina!—I wasn't thinking anything about her!"

"Does she think that, Leo?" Nina said to him gently. "Ah, you do not know that woman. She is clever; she is cunning; she wishes to have the fame of being associated with you—even in a photograph for the shop-windows; and you are so blind! The duel?—yes, she would have liked that, too, for the newspapers to speak about it, and the public to talk, and her name and yours together; but then she says 'No, he will owe more to me if I interfere, and get an apology for him.' It is one way or the other way—anything to win your

attention—that you should care for her—and that you should show it to the world—— "

"Nina, Nina," said he, "you want to make me outrageously vain. Do you imagine she had a single thought for me when she had Lord Denysfort to carry on with—he hasn't much in his head, poor devil, but a title goes a long way in the theatrical world—and when she could practise on the susceptibilities of her humble adorer who was further down the table? Oh, I fancy Miss Burgoyne had enough to occupy herself with this evening without thinking of me. She was quite busy."

"Ah, you do not understand, Leo," Nina said. "But some day you may understand—if Miss Burgoyne still finds you indifferent, and becomes angry. But before that, she will try much—— "

"Nina!"

"You will see, Leo!" Nina said; and that was all she could say just then, for Mr. Lehmann came up to take the general vote as to whether they would rather have tea out here in the moonlight or return to the dining-room.

But any doubt as to the manner in which Miss Burgoyne regarded his intercession on behalf of Mr. Percival Miles was removed, and that in a

most summary fashion, by the young lady herself. As they were about to leave the hotel, the men were standing about in the hall, chatting at haphazard, or lighting a fresh cigar, while they waited for the women folk to get ready. Lionel saw Miss Burgoyne coming along the corridor, and was glad of the chance of saying good-night to her before she got on to the front of Lord Denysfort's drag. But it was not good-night that Miss Burgoyne had in her mind.

"Mr. Moore," she said, when she came up, and she spoke in a low, clear, incisive voice that considerably startled him. "I am told it was through you that that boy was invited to the dinner to-night."

He looked at her in amazement.

"Well, what then?" he exclaimed. "What was the objection? I thought he was a friend of yours. That boy?—that boy is a sufficiently important person, surely—heir to the Petmansworth estates—why, I should have thought——"

She interrupted him.

"I consider it a gross piece of impertinence," she said haughtily. "I suppose you thought you were conferring a favour on *me!* How dared you assume that any one—that any one—wished him to be present in that room!"

She turned proudly away from him without waiting for his reply.

"Lord Denysfort, here I am," said she; and the chinless young man with the large ears gave her his arm and conducted her down the steps. Lionel looked after her—bewildered.

CHAPTER VI.

'LET THE STRICKEN DEER GO WEEP.'

But if Lionel regarded this constant association with Nina—this unreserved discussion of all their private affairs—even the sort of authority and guidance he exercised over her at times—as so simple and natural a thing that it was unnecessary to pause and ask whither it might tend, what about Nina herself? She was quite alone in this country; she had more regard for the future than he had; what if certain wistful hopes, concealed almost from herself, had sprung up amidst all this intimate and frankly affectionate companionship?

One morning she and Estelle were walking in to Regent-street, to examine proofs of certain photographs that had been taken of them both (for *Clara* figured in the shop-windows now as well as *Capitaine Crépin*). Nina was very merry and vivacious on this sufficiently bright forenoon; and

to please Estelle she was talking French—her French being fluent enough, if it was not quite perfect as to accent. They were passing along Piccadilly when she stopped at a certain shop.

"Come, I show you something," she said.

Estelle followed her in. The moment the shopman saw who this was he did not wait to be questioned.

"It is quite ready, Miss; I was just about to send it down."

He brought forward the double loving-cup that Lionel had given to Nina; and as the young lady took it into her hands she glanced at the rim. Yes; the inscription was quite right: "*From Leo to Nina*"—that was the simple legend she had had engraved.

"Here is the cup I spoke of, Estelle: is it not beautiful? And then I would not trouble Lionel to have the inscription made—I told him I would have it done myself, and asked him what the words should be—behold it!"

The cup was duly admired and handed back to be sent down to Sloane-street; then Estelle and she left the shop together.

"Oh, yes, it is very beautiful," said the former, continuing to speak in her native tongue; "and

a very distinguished present; but there is something still more piquant that he will be buying for you ere long—can you not guess, Nina?—no?—not a wedding-ring?"

The audacity of the question somewhat disconcerted Nina; but she met it with no sham denial, no affected protest.

"He has not spoken to me, Estelle," Nina said, gravely and simply. "And sometimes I ask myself if it is not better we should remain as we are—we are such good friends and companions. We are happy; we have plenty to occupy ourselves with; why undertake more serious cares? Perhaps that is all that Lionel thinks of it; and if it is so, I am content. And then sometimes, Estelle, I ask myself if it would not be better for him to marry—when he has made his choice, that is to say; and I picture him and his young wife living very happily in a quite small establishment—perhaps two or three rooms, only, in one of those large buildings in Victoria-street—and everything very pretty around them, with their music and their occupations and the visits of friends. Would not that be for him a life far more satisfactory than his present distractions—the gaieties and amusements—the invitations of strangers?——"

"Yes, yes, yes!" her companion cried, with instant assent. "Ah, Nina, I can see you the most charming young house-mistress—I can see you receive your guests when they come for afternoon music—you wear a tea-gown of brocade the colour of wall-flower, with cream-coloured lace—you speak French, English, Italian as it is necessary for this one and that—your musical réunions are known everywhere. Will Madame permit the poor Estelle to be present?—Estelle, who will not dare to sing before those celebrated ones, but who will applaud, applaud—in herself a prodigious *claque!* And now, behold! Miss Burgoyne arrives — Miss Burgoyne in grand state — and nevertheless you are her dear Nina, her charming friend, although in her heart she hates you for having carried off the handsome Lionel——"

"Estelle," said Nina, gently, "you let your tongue run away. When I picture to myself Lionel in the future, I leave the space beside him empty. Who is to fill it?—perhaps he has never given a thought to that. Perhaps it will always be empty; perhaps one of his fashionable friends will suddenly appear there, who knows? He does not seem ever to look forward: if I remonstrate about his expenditure, he laughs. And why

should he give me things of value? I am not covetous. If he wishes to express kindness, is not a word better than any silver cup? If he wishes to be remembered when he is absent, would not the smallest message sent in a letter be of more value than a bracelet with sapphires——"

"Oh, Nina," her companion exclaimed, laughing, "what a thing to say!—that you would rather have a scrap of writing from Lionel Moore than a bracelet with sapphires——"

"No, Estelle, I did not," Nina protested, rather indignantly; "I was talking of the value of presents generally, and of their use, or uselessness."

"And yet you seemed very proud of that loving-cup, Nina, and of the inscription on it," Estelle said demurely; and there the subject ended; for they were now approaching the photographers.

It was a Saturday night that Honnor Cunyngham and her mother—who had come up from Brighton for a few days—had been induced to fix for their visit to the New Theatre; and as the evening drew near, Lionel became more and more anxious, so that he almost regretted having persuaded them. All his other troubles and worries he could at once carry to Nina, whose cheerful

common-sense and abundant courage made light of them and lent him heart; but this one he had to ponder over by himself; he did not care to tell Nina with what concern he looked forward to the impressions that Miss Cunyngham might form of himself and his surroundings when brought immediately into contact with these. And yet he was not altogether silent.

"You see how it is, Nina," he said, in tones of deep vexation. "That fellow Collier has been allowed to gag and gag until the whole piece is filled with his music-hall tomfoolery, and the music has been made quite subsidiary. I wonder Lehmann doesn't get a lot of acrobats and conjurors, and let Miss Burgoyne and you and me stop at home. *The Squire's Daughter* is really a very pretty piece, with some delightful melody running through it; but that fellow has vulgarised it into the lowest burlesque——"

"What does it matter to you, Leo?" Nina said. "What he does is separate from you. He cannot vulgarise your singing."

"But he makes all that clowning of his so important—it has become so big a feature of the piece that any friends of yours coming to see the little opera might very naturally say, 'Oh, is this

the kind of thing he figures in? This is an intellectual entertainment, truly!'"

"But you do not join in it, Leo!" Nina protested.

"In the most gagging scene of all, I've got to stand and look on the whole time!" he said.

"Oh, no, Leo," Nina said, with mock sympathy, "you can listen to Miss Burgoyne as she talks to you from behind her fan."

"Those two ladies I told you of," he continued, "who are coming on Saturday night—I wonder what they will think of all that low-comedy stuff. I begin to wish I hadn't asked them to come behind; but I thought it might be a sort of inducement. Miss Cunyngham was very kind to me when I was in the Highlands; and this was all I could think of; but I don't think she has much of the frivolous curiosity of her sisters-in-law; and I am not sure her mother and she would even care much for the honour of having tea in Miss Burgoyne's room. No, I wish I hadn't asked them——"

"Do you value their opinion so highly, then, Leo?" Nina asked gently.

"Oh, yes," he said, with some hesitation—"that is, I shouldn't like them to form any unfavourable impression—to go away with any scornful feeling towards comic opera—and towards the people

engaged in it—I should like them to think well of the piece. I suppose I couldn't bribe Collier to leave out the half of his gag, or the whole of it, for that particular night. Did you see what one of the papers said about the 400th performance?—that the fate of *The Squire's Daughter* had for some time been doubtful, but that it had been saved by the increased prominence given to the part played by Mr. Tom Collier!—a compliment to the public taste!—the piece saved by lugging in a lot of music-hall buffoonery!——"

"But, Leo," Nina said, "your friends who are coming on Saturday night will not think you responsible for all that."

"People are apt to judge of you by your associates, Nina," he said, absently: he was clearly looking forward to this visit with some compunction, not to say alarm.

Then he went to Miss Burgoyne. Miss Burgoyne had forgiven him for having introduced Percival Miles to the Richmond dinner-party; indeed, she was generally as ready to forgive as she was quick to take offence.

"I wish you would do me a very great favour," he said.

"What is it?" asked *Grace Mainwaring,* who

was standing in front of the tall mirror, adjusting the shining stars and crescents that adorned her powdered hair.

"I suppose you could wear a little nosegay with that dress," he said, "of natural flowers, done up with a bit of white satin ribbon, perhaps, and a silver tube and cord, or something of that kind."

"Flowers?" she repeated. "Oh, yes, I could wear them—if any one were polite enough to give me them."

"I shall be delighted to send you some every evening for a month, if you'll only do this for me on Saturday," said he. "It is on Saturday night those two ladies are coming to the theatre; and you were good enough to promise to ask them to your room and offer them some tea. The younger of the two—that is, Miss Cunyngham—has never been behind the scenes of a theatre before; and I think she will be very pleased to be introduced to *Miss Grace Mainwaring;* and don't you think it would be rather nice of *Miss Grace Mainwaring* to take those flowers from her dress and present them to the young lady, as a souvenir of her visit?"

She wheeled round, and looked at him with a curious scrutiny.

"Well, this *is* something new!" she said, as she turned to the mirror again. "I thought it was the fortunate *Harry Thornhill* who received all kinds of compliments and attentions from his lady-adorers; I wasn't aware he ever returned them. But do you think it is quite fair, Mr. Moore? If this is some girl who has a love-sick fancy for *Harry Thornhill*, don't you think you should drop *Harry Thornhill*, and play *David Garrick*, to cure the poor thing?"

"Considering that Miss Cunyngham has never seen *Harry Thornhill*——" he was beginning, when she interrupted him.

"Oh, only heard him sing in private? Quite enough, I suppose, to put nonsense into a silly schoolgirl's head."

"When you see this young lady," he observed, "I don't think you will say she looks like a silly schoolgirl. She's nearly as tall as I am, for one thing."

"I hate giraffes," said Miss Burgoyne, tartly. "Do you put a string round her neck when you go out walking with her?"

He was just on the point of saying something about green-room manners; but thought better of it.

"Now, Miss Burgoyne," he said to her, "on Saturday night you are going to put on your most winning way—you can do it when you like—and you are going to captivate and fascinate those two people until they'll go away home with the conviction that you are the most charming and delightful creature that ever lived. You can do it easily enough if you like—no one better. You are going to be very nice to them—and you'll send them away just in love with *Grace Mainwaring*."

Miss Burgoyne altered her tone a little.

"If I give your giraffe-friend those flowers, I suppose you expect me to tell lies as well?" she asked, with some approach to good-humour.

"About what?"

"Oh, about being delighted to make her acquaintance, and that kind of thing."

"I have no doubt you will be as pleased to make her acquaintance as she will be to make yours," said he; "and a few civil words never do any harm."

Here Miss Burgoyne was called. She went to the little side-table, and sipped some of her home-brewed lemonade; then he opened the door for her; and together they went up into the wings.

"Tall, is she?" continued Miss Burgoyne, as

they were looking on at Mr. Tom Collier's buffooneries out there on the stage. "Is she as silent and stupid as her brother?"

"Her brother?"

"Lord Rockminster."

"Oh, Lord Rockminster isn't her brother. You've got them mixed up," said Lionel. "Miss Cunyngham's brother, Sir Hugh, married a sister of Lord Rockminster—the Lady Adela Cunyngham who came to your room one night—don't you remember?"

"You seem to have the whole Peerage and Baronetage at your fingers' ends," said she, sullenly; and the next moment she was on the stage, smiling and gracious, and receiving her father's guests with that charming manner which the heroine of the operetta could assume when she chose.

Even with Miss Burgoyne's grudgingly-promised assistance, Lionel still remained unaccountably perturbed about that visit of Lady Cunyngham and her daughter; and when on the Saturday evening he first became aware—through the confused glare of the footlights—that the two ladies had come into the box he had secured for them, it seemed to him as though he was

responsible for every single feature of the performance. As for himself, he was at his best, and he knew it; he sang 'The starry night brings me no rest' with such a verve that the enthusiasm of the audience was unbounded; even Miss Burgoyne—*Miss Grace Mainwaring*, that is, who was perched up on a bit of scaffolding in order to throw a rose to her lover—listened with a new interest instead of being busy with her ribbons and the set of her hair; and when she opened the casement in answer to his impassioned appeal, she kissed the crimson cotton blossom thrice ere she dropped it to her enraptured swain below. This was all very well; but when the comic man took possession of the stage, Lionel—instead of going off to his dressing-room, to glance at an evening paper, or have a chat with some acquaintance—remained in the wings, looking on with an indescribable loathing. This hideous farcicality seemed more vulgar than ever: what would Honnor Cunyngham think of his associates? He felt as if he were an accomplice in foisting this wretched music-hall stuff on the public. And the mother—the tall lady with the proud, fine features, and the grave and placid voice—what would she think of the new acquaintance whom her daughter had introduced

to her? Had it been Lady Adela or her sisters, he would not have cared one jot. They were proud to be in alliance with professional people; they flattered themselves that they rather belonged to the set; actors, authors, artists, musicians, those busy and eager amateurs considered to be, like themselves, of imagination all compact. But that he should have asked Honnor Cunyngham to come and look on at the antics of this gaping and grinning fool; that she should know he had to consort with such folk; that she should consider him an aider and abettor in putting this kind of entertainment before the public—this galled him to the quick. The murmur of the Aivron and the Geinig seemed dinning in his ears. If only he could have thrown aside these senseless trappings —if he were an under-keeper now, or a water-bailiff, or even a gillie looking after the dogs and the ponies, he could have met the gaze of those clear hazel eyes without shame. But here he was the coadjutor of this grimacing clown; and she was sitting in her box there—and thinking.

"What is it, Leo?" said Nina, coming up to him rather timidly. "You are annoyed."

"I have made a mistake, that is all," he said, rather impatiently. "I shouldn't have persuaded

those two ladies to come to the theatre; I forgot what kind of thing we played in; I might as well have asked them to go to a penny gaff. Collier is worse than ever to-night——"

"And you better, Leo," said Nina, who had always comforting words for him. "Did you not hear how enthusiastic the audience were? And if this is the young lady you told me of—who was so friendly in Scotland that she did not fear ridicule for herself in order to save you from the possibility of ridicule—surely she will be so well-wishing to you that she will understand you have nothing to do with the foolishness on the stage——"

"If you are thinking of that salmon-fishing incident," he said, rather hastily, "of course you mustn't imagine there was any fear of *her* encountering any ridicule. Oh, certainly not. It was no new thing for her to get wet when she was out fishing——"

"At all events it was a friendly act to you," said Nina, on whom that occurrence seemed to have made some impression. "And if she is so generous, so benevolent towards you, do you think she will not see you are not responsible for the comic business?"

It was at the end of the penultimate act that

an attendant brought round Miss Cunyngham and her mother—the latter a handsome and distinguished-looking elderly lady, with white hair done up à la Marie Antoinette—behind the scenes; and Nina, hanging some way back, could see them being presented to Miss Burgoyne. Nina was a little breathless and bewildered. She had heard a good deal about the fisher-maiden in the far north, of her hardy out-of-door life, and her rough and serviceable costume; and perhaps she had formed some mental picture of her—very different from the actual appearance of this tall young Englishwoman, whose clear, calm eyes, strongly-marked eyebrows, and proud, refined features were so striking. Here was no simple maiden in a suit of serge; but a young woman of commanding presence, whose long cloak of tan-coloured velvet, with its hanging sleeves showing a flash of crimson, seemed to Nina to have a sort of royal magnificence about it. And yet her manner appeared to be very simple and gentle; she smiled as she talked to Miss Burgoyne; and the last that Nina saw of her—as they all left together in the direction of the corridor, Lionel obsequiously attending them—was that the tall young lady walked with a most gracious carriage.

Nina made sure that they had all disappeared before she, too, went down the steps; then she made her way to her own room, to get ready for the final act. Mlle. Girond, of course, was also here; but Nina had no word for Estelle; she seemed pre-occupied about something.

Never had *Harry Thornhill* dressed so quickly; and when, in his gay costume of flowered silk and ruffles, tied-wig, and buckled shoes, he tapped at Miss Burgoyne's door and entered, he found that that young lady was still in the curtained apartment, though she had sent out Jane to see that her two visitors were being looked after. Lionel, too, helped himself to some tea; and it was with a singular feeling of relief that he discovered, as he presently did, that both Lady Cunyngham and her daughter were quite charmed with the piece, so far as they had seen it. They appeared to put the farcicality altogether aside, and to have been much impressed by the character of the music.

"What a pretty girl that Miss Ross is!" said the younger of the two ladies incidentally. "But she is not English, is she? I thought I could detect a trace of foreign accent here and there."

"No, she is Italian," Lionel made answer.

"Her name is really Rossi—Antonia Rossi—but her intimate friends call her Nina."

"What a beautiful voice she has!" Miss Honnor continued. "So fresh and pure and sweet. I think she has a far more beautiful voice than——"

He quickly held up his hand; and the hint was taken.

"And she puts such life into her part—she seems to be really light-hearted and merry," resumed Miss Honnor, who appeared to have been much taken by Nina's manner on the stage. "Do you know, Mr. Moore, I could not help to-night thinking more than once of *The Chaplet*, and my sisters, and their amateur friends. The difference between an amateur performance and a performance of trained artists is so marvellous; it doesn't seem to me to be one of degree at all; at an amateur performance, however clever it may be, I am conscious all the time that the people are assuming something quite foreign to themselves, whereas on the stage the people seem to be the actual characters they profess to be. I forget they are actors and actresses——"

"You must be a good audience, Miss Cunyngham," said he (it used to be "Miss Honnor" in Strathaivron, but that was some time ago—*then*

he was not decked out and painted for exhibition on the stage).

"Oh, I like to believe," she said. "I don't wish to criticise. I wholly and delightfully give myself up to the illusion. Mother and I go so seldom to the theatre that we are under no temptation to begin and ask how this or that is done, or to make any comparisons; we surrender ourselves to the story, and believe the people to be real people all we can. As for mother, if it weren't a dreadful secret—— "

But here the curtains were thrown wide, and out came Miss Burgoyne, obviously conscious of her magnificent costume, and profuse in her apologies for not appearing sooner. Something had gone wrong, and the mishap had kept her late; indeed she had just time to go through the formality of taking a cup of tea with her guests when she was called and had to get ready to go.

"However, I need not say good-bye, just yet," she said to them, as she tucked up her voluminous train. "Wouldn't you like to look on for a little while from the wings? You could have the prompter's chair, Lady Cunyngham, so that you could see the audience or the stage, just as you chose; if Miss Cunyngham didn't mind standing about among the gasmen."

"If you are sure we shall not be in the way," said the elder lady, who had perhaps a little more curiosity than her daughter.

"Oh, Mr. Moore will show you," said Miss Burgoyne, making no scruple about preceding her visitors along the corridor and up the steps, for she had not too much time.

The prompter's office, now that this piece had been running over four hundred nights, was practically a sinecure, so that there was no trouble about getting Lady Cunyngham installed in the little corner, whence, through a small aperture, she could regard the dusky-hued audience or turn her attention to the stage just as she pleased. Miss Honnor stood close by her, when she was allowed —keeping out of sight of the opposite boxes as much as she could; though she observed that the workmen about her did not care much whether they were visible or not, and that they talked or called to each other with a fine indifference towards what was going forward on the stage. At present a minuet was being danced; and very pretty it was; she could not help noticing how cleverly Miss Burgoyne managed her train. As for her mother, the old lady seemed intensely interested, and yet conscious all the time that she herself, in

this strange position, was an interloper; again and again she rose and offered to resign her place to the rather shabby-looking elderly man who was the rightful occupant; but he just as often begged her to remain—he seemed mostly interested in the management of the gas-handles just over his head.

And now came in the comic interlude which Lionel had feared most of all—the Squire's faithful henchman going through all the phases of getting drunk in double-quick stage-time; and while those stupidities were going forward Lionel and Miss Burgoyne were supposed to retire up the stage somewhat and look on. Well, they took up their positions—*Grace Mainwaring* being seated.

"Your giraffe is rather handsome," she said, behind her fan.

"I believe she is considered to be one of the best-looking women in England," said he, somewhat stiffly.

"Oh, really! Well, of course, tastes differ," *Miss Grace Mainwaring* said. "I don't think a woman should have blacking-brushes instead of eyebrows. But it's a matter of taste."

"Yes," said he, "and comic opera is the sort of place where one's taste becomes so refined.

What do you think of this gag now? Is this what the public like—when they come to hear music?"

"You're very fastidious—you want everything to be superfine—but you may depend on it that it keeps the piece going with the pit and gallery."

His answer to that was one of this young lady's strangest experiences of the stage: Lionel Moore had suddenly left her, and, indeed, quitted this scene in which he was supposed to be a chief figure. He walked down the wings, until he found himself close to Miss Honnor Cunyngham.

"Miss Cunyngham!" he said.

She turned—her eyes somewhat bewildered by the glare of light on the stage.

"Come back, please," he said. "I don't want you to see this scene—it has nothing to do with the operetta—and it is dull and stupid and tedious beyond description."

She followed him two or three steps, wondering.

"You say you like the music," he continued—here in the twilight of the wings, "and the little story is really rather pretty and idyllic; but they *will* go and introduce a lot of music-hall stuff to please the groundlings. I should prefer you not

to see it. Won't you rather wait a little, and talk about something?—it isn't often you and I meet. Did you get many salmon after I left Strathaivron?"

"Oh, no," said she—still rather surprised. "Towards the end of the season, the red fish are really not worth landing."

"It seems a long time since then," he said. "I find myself sitting up at night and thinking over all those experiences—making pictures of them—and the hours go by in a most astonishing fashion. Here in London, among the November fogs, it seems so strange to think of those splendid days, and the long clear twilights. I suppose it is all so well-known to you, you do not trouble to recall it; but I do—it is like a dream—only that I see everything so distinctly—I seem almost to be able to touch each leaf of the bushes in the little dell where we used to have luncheon: do you remember?"

"Above the Geinig Pool?—oh, yes!" she said, smiling.

"And the Junction Pool," he continued, with a curious eagerness, as if he were claiming her sympathy, her interest, on account of that old companionship—"I can make the clearest vision

of it as I sit up all by myself at night—you remember the little bush on the opposite side that you used sometimes to catch your fly on—and the shelf of shingle going suddenly down into the brown water—I always thought that was rather a dangerous place. And how well you used to fish the Rock Pool! Old Robert used to be so proud of you! Once, at the tail of the Rock Pool, you wound up, and said to him 'Well, I can't do any better than that, Robert;' and then he said 'No man ever fished that pool better—oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Honnor: no one at all ever fished that pool better.' I suppose Strathaivron is nothing to you—you must be so familiar with it—but to me it is a sort of wonderland, to dream of when I am all by myself at night——"

Alas! it was at this very moment that Nina came up from her room: *Clara*, the innkeeper's daughter, had to go on immediately after the ball-room scene was over. And Nina, as she came by, caught sight of those two; and for a moment she stood still, her eyes staring. The two figures were in a sort of twilight—a twilight as compared with the glare of the stage beyond them; but there were gases here quite sufficient to illumine their features: it was no imagination on Nina's part—she saw

with a startling clearness that Lionel was regarding this tall, English-looking girl with a look she had never seen him direct towards any woman before—a timid, wistful, half-beseeching look that needed no words to explain its meaning. For a second Nina stood there, paralysed—not daring to breathe—not able to move. Yet was it altogether a revelation to her, or only a sudden and overwhelming confirmation of certain half-frightened misgivings which had visited her from time to time and which she had striven hard to banish? The next moment Nina had passed on silently, like a ghost, and had disappeared in the dusk behind some scenery.

"When shall you be back in Strathaivron, Miss Honnor?" he asked.

"In the spring, I suppose, for the salmon-fishing," she made answer.

"You will be up there in the clear April days, by the side of that beautiful river, and I shall be playing the mountebank here, among the London gas and fog."

But at this moment the orchestra began the slow music that intimated the resumption of the minuet; and this recalled him to his senses; he had hurriedly to take leave of her, and then he

went and rejoined Miss Burgoyne, who merely said 'Well, that's a pretty trick!' as she gave him her hand for the dance.

A still stranger thing, however, happened in the next scene, where the gay young officer, the French prisoner of war, makes love to the innkeeper's daughter. Estelle noticed with great surprise that not only did Nina deliver the English maiden's retorts without any of the saucy spirit that the situation demanded, but also that she was quite confused about the words, stammering and hesitating, and getting through them in the most perfunctory manner. At last, when the little *Capitaine Crépin* says '*Bewitching maid, say you will fly with me!*' *Clara's* reply is '*You forget I am to be married to-morrow—see, here comes my betrothed*'—but Nina only got as far as '*married to-morrow*'—then she paused—hesitated—she put her hand to her head as if everything had gone from her brain—and at the same moment Estelle, with the most admirable presence of mind, exclaimed along '*See, here comes your betrothed*' thus giving the lover his cue. The dialogue now remained with Estelle and this husband-elect, so that Nina had time to recover; and in the trio that closes the scene she sang her part well

enough. Directly they had left the stage, Estelle ran to her friend.

"Nina, what was the matter!" she exclaimed.

"My head—" said Nina, pressing her hand against her forehead, and talking rather faintly—"I do not know—my head is giddy, Estelle—oh, I wish it was all over!—I wish I was home!"

"You have very little more to do now, Nina!" Estelle said quickly to her, in French. "Come, you must have courage, Nina—I will run and get you my smelling-salts, and it will pass away—oh, you must make an effort, Nina—would you let Miss Burgoyne see you break down—no, no, indeed! You will be all right, Nina, I assure you—and I will tell the prompter to be on the watch for you—oh, I wouldn't give way—before Miss Burgoyne—if I were you, no, not for a hundred pounds!"

Therewith the kind-hearted little French officer sped away to her own room, and brought back the smelling-salts, and was most eagerly solicitous that Nina should conquer this passing attack of hysteria, as she deemed it. And indeed Nina managed to get through the rest of her part without any serious breakdown—to Estelle's exceeding joy.

As they went home together in the four-wheeled cab, Nina did not utter a word. Once or twice Estelle fancied she heard a slight sob; but she merely said to herself—

"Ah, it has come back, that trembling of the nerves? But I will make her take some wine at supper, and she will go to bed and sleep well: to-morrow she will have forgotten all about it."

And Estelle was most kind and considerate when they got down to Sloane-street. She helped Nina off with her things; she stirred up the fire; she put a bottle of white wine on the table, where supper was already laid; she drew in Nina's chair for her. Then Mrs. Grey came up, to see that her children, as she called them, were all right: and she was easily induced to stay for a little while, for a retired actress is always eager to hear news of the theatre; so she and Miss Girond fell to talking between themselves. Nina sate silent: her eyes seemed heavy and tired; she only pretended to touch the food and the wine before her.

"Very well, then, Nina," her friend said, when Mrs. Grey had gone, "if you will have nothing to eat or to drink, you must go to bed and see what a sound night's rest will do for you. I am

going to sit up a little while to read, but I shall not disturb you."

"Good-night, then, Estelle," said Nina, rather languidly; "you have been so kind to me!"

They kissed each other; then Nina opened the folding doors, and disappeared into her own room; while Estelle took up her book. It was *Les Vacances de Camille* she had got hold of; but she did not turn the pages quickly; there was something else in her mind. She was thinking of Nina. She was troubled about her, in a vague kind of way. She had never seen Nina look like that before; and she was puzzled—and a little concerned.

Suddenly, in this hushed stillness, she heard, or fancied she heard, a slight sound that startled her: it came from the adjoining room. Stealthily she arose and approached the door; she put her ear close and listened; yes, she had not been mistaken—Nina was sobbing bitterly. Estelle did not hesitate a moment; she boldly opened the door and went in; and the first thing she beheld was Nina, just as she had left the other room, now lying prone on the bed, her face buried in the pillow, while in vain she tried to control the violence of her grief.

"Nina!" she cried, in alarm.

Nina sprung up—she thrust out both trembling hands, as if wildly seeking for help—and Estelle was not slow to seize them.

"Nina, what is it?" she exclaimed, frightened by the haggard face and streaming eyes.

"Estelle!—Estelle!" said Nina, in a low voice that simply tore the heart of this faithful friend of hers. "It is nothing! It is only that my life is broken—my life is broken—and I have no mother—*Porerina!* she would have said to me——"

Her sobs choked her speech; she withdrew her trembling hands; she threw herself again on the bed, face downward, and burst into a wild fit of weeping. Estelle knew not what to do: she was terrified.

"Nina, what has happened!" she cried again.

"It is nothing!—it is nothing!—it is nothing!" she said, between her passionate sobs. "I have made a mistake; I am punished—oh, God, can you not kill me!—I do not wish to live——"

"Nina!" said Estelle, and the girl bent down and put her cheek close to her friend's, and she tenderly placed both her hands on the masses of beautiful blue-black hair. "Nina—tell me!"

In time the violent sobbing ceased, or partially

ceased; Nina rose, but she clung to Estelle's hand, and kissed it passionately.

"You have been so kind, so affectionate, to me, Estelle! To-morrow you will know—perhaps. I will leave you a letter. I am going away. If you forget me—well, that is right; if you do not forget me, do not think bad of—of poor Nina!"

"I don't know what you mean, Nina," said Estelle, who was herself whimpering by this time: "but I won't let you go away. No, I will not. You do not know what you say. It is madness—to-morrow morning you will reflect—to-morrow morning you will tell me, and rely on me as a friend."

"Yes, to-morrow morning, all will be right, Estelle," Nina said, again kissing the hand that she clung to. "Pardon me that I have kept you up—and disturbed you. Go away to your bed. Estelle—to-morrow morning, all will be right!"

Very reluctantly Estelle was at length persuaded to leave; and as she left she turned off the gas in the sitting-room. A few minutes thereafter Nina, still dressed as she had come home from the theatre, entered the room, re-lit the gas, and noiselessly proceeded to clear a portion of the table, on which she placed writing-materials. Then she

went into her bedroom and fetched a little drawer in which she kept her valuables; and the first thing she did was to take out an old-fashioned gold ring she had brought with her from Naples. She put the ring in an envelope, and (while her eyelids were still heavy with tears, and her cheeks wan and worn) she wrote outside—'*For Estelle.*'

CHAPTER VII.

AN AWAKENING.

London is a dreary-looking city on a Sunday morning, especially on a Sunday morning in November; people seem to know how tedious the hours are going to be, and lie in bed as long as they decently can; the teeming and swarming capital of the world looks as if it had suddenly grown lifeless. When Lionel got up, there was a sort of yellow darkness in the air; hardly a single human being was visible in the Green Park over the way; a solitary saunterer, hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat, who wandered idly along the neglected pavement, had the appearance of having been out all night, and of not knowing what to do with himself, now that what passed for daylight had come. All of a sudden there flashed into the brain of this young man standing by the French window a yearning to get away from this dark and dismal town—

there came before him a vision of clear air, of wind-swept waves, with an after-church promenade of fashionable folk in which he might recognise the welcome face of many a friend. He looked at his watch; there was yet time; he would hurry through his breakfast—and catch the 10.45 to Brighton.

But was there nothing else prompting this unpremeditated resolve to get away down to Victoria-station? Not some secret hope that he might perchance descry Lady Cunyngham and her daughter among the crowd swarming on to the long platform? They had not definitely told him at the theatre that they were returning the next morning; but was it not just possible—or rather, extremely probable? And surely he might presume on their mutual acquaintance so far as to get into the same railway-carriage, and have some casual chatting with them on the way down? He had been as attentive as he could to them on the previous evening; and they had seemed pleased. And he had tried to arouse in Miss Honnor's mind some recollection of the closer relationship which had existed between her and him in the solitudes of far Strathaivron.

When he did arrive at Victoria-station he found

the people pouring in in shoals; for now was the very height of the Brighton season; besides which there were plenty of Londoners glad to escape, if only for a day, from the perpetual fog and gloom. And yet, curiously enough, although the carriages were being rapidly filled, he took no trouble about securing a seat. After he had gone down the whole length of the train, he turned, and kept watching the new arrivals as they came through the distant gate. The time for departure was imminent; but he did not seem anxious about getting to Brighton. And at last his patience, or his obstinacy, was rewarded; he saw two figures—away along there—that he instantly recognised; even at a greater distance he could have told that one of these was Honnor Cunyngham, for who else in all England walked like that? The two ladies were unattended by either man or maid; and as they came along they seemed rather concerned at the crowded condition of the train. Lionel walked quickly forward to meet them. There was no time for the expression of surprise on their part—only for the briefest greeting.

"I must try to get you seats," said he, "but the train appears to be very full, and the guards are at their wits' end. I say!" he called to a

porter. "Look here; this train is crammed, and the people are pouring in yet: what are they going to do?"

"There's a relief train, sir," said the porter, indicating a long row of empty carriages just across the platform.

"You are sure these are going?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we can get in now?"

The man looked doubtful; but Lionel soon settled that matter by taking the two ladies along to a Pullman car, where the conductor at once allowed them to pass. It is true that as soon as the public outside perceived that these empty carriages were also going, they took possession without more ado; but in the meantime Lionel and his two companions had had their choice of places, so that they were seated together when the train started.

"It was most fortunate we met you," Lady Cunyngham said, bending very friendly eyes on the young man. "I do so hate a crowded train: it happens so seldom in travelling in England that one is not used to it. Are you going down to Brighton for any time, Mr. Moore?"

"Mother," said Honnor Cunyngham, almost

reproachfully, "you forget what Mr. Moore's engagements are."

"Yes," said he, with a smile, "it is rather a cruel question. My glimpses of the sea and sky are few and far between. The heavens that I usually find over my head are made of canvas; and the country scenes I wander through are run on on wheels."

"But don't you think," said Miss Honnor to him (and it seemed so cheerful to be away from the London gloom, and out here in the clearer air: to find himself sitting so near this young lady, able to regard her dress, listening to her voice, sometimes venturing to meet the straightforward glance of her calm eyes—all this was a wondrous and marvellous thing)—"don't you think you enjoy getting away from town all the more keenly? I shall never forget you in Strathaivron: *you* were never bored like some of the other gentlemen."

"Each and every day was one to be marked with a white stone," he said, with an earnestness hardly befitting railway-carriage conversation.

"The wet ones, too?" she asked, pleasantly.

"Wet or dry, what was the difference?" he made bold to say. "What did I care about the

rain if I could go down to the Aivron or away up to the Geinig with you and old Robert ?"

"You certainly were very brave about it," she said, in the most friendly way; "you never once grumbled when the sandwiches got damp—not once."

And so the three of them kept lightly and carelessly talking and chatting together, as the long train thundered away to the south; while ever and anon they could turn their eyes to that changing phantasmagoria of the outer world that went whirling by the windows. It was rather a wild-looking day, sometimes brightening with a wan glare of sunlight, but more often darkening until the country looked like a French landscape, in its sombre tones of grey and black and green. Yet nevertheless there was a sort of picturesqueness in the brooding sky, the russet woods, the purple hedges, and the new-ploughed furrows; while now and again a distant mansion, set on a height, shone a fair yellow above its terraced lawn. Scattered rooks swept down the wind and settled in a field. The moorhens had forsaken the ruffled water of the ponds, and sought shelter among the withered sedge. Puffs of white steam from the engine flew across and were lost in the

leafless trees. Embankments suddenly showed themselves high in the air, and as suddenly dipped again; then there were long stretches of coppice, with red bracken, and a sprinkling of gold on the oaks. To Lionel the time went by all too quickly: before he had half said all he wanted to say, behold! here they were at Preston Park.

"You are at least remaining over until to-morrow?" Lady Cunyngham asked of him.

"Well, no," said he, "I did not think of coming down until this morning, and so I had made no arrangements. I should think it hardly likely there would be a vacant bedroom at the Orleans Club at this time of year—no, in any case, I must get back by the 8.40 to-night."

"And in the meantime," she asked again, "have you any engagement?"

"None. I dare say I shall have a stroll along the sea-front, and then drop in for lunch to the Orleans."

"You might as well come down now and lunch with us," said she, simply.

Lionel's face brightened up amazingly: he had been looking forward to saying good-bye at the station with anything but joy.

"I should be delighted—if I am not in the way," was his prompt answer.

"Oh, Honnor and I are entirely by ourselves at present," said this elderly lady with the silver-white hair. "We are expecting Lady Adela and her sisters this week, however; and perhaps my son will come down later on."

"Are they back from Scotland?"

"They arrive to-morrow, I believe."

"And Lady Adela's novel?"

"Oh, I don't know anything about that," said she, with a good-humoured smile. "Surely she can't have written another novel already!"

When they got in to the station, a footman was awaiting them, but they had no bags or baggage of any description; they walked a little way along the platform and entered the carriage; presently they were driving away down to the sea-front. What Honnor Cunyngham thought of the arrangement, it is impossible to say, but the invitation was none of her giving; no doubt it was merely a little compliment in acknowledgment of Mr. Moore's kindness of the preceding night. However, when the barouche pulled up in front of a house in Adelaide Crescent, Mr. Moore had his own proposal to make.

"It seems so pleasant down there," said he, looking towards the wide stretches of greensward and the promenade along the sea-wall, where the people, just come out of church, were strolling to and fro; "everyone appears to be out—don't you think we should have a little walk before going in?"

Honnor Cunyngham said nothing; it was her mother who at once and goodnaturedly assented; and when they had descended from the carriage they forthwith made their way down to mix in this idle throng. It was quite a bright and pleasant morning here—a stiff south-westerly breeze blowing—a considerably heavy sea thundering in and springing with jets of white spray into the air—the sunlight shining along the yellow houses of Brunswick Terrace where there were cheerful bits of green here and there in the balconies. Then the crowd was rather more gaily dressed than an English crowd usually is; for women allow themselves a little more latitude in the way of colour during the Brighton season; and on such a morning there was ample excuse for a display of sunshades. And was it merely a wish to breathe the fresh-blowing wind and to listen to the hissing withdrawal and recurrent roar of the waves that

had induced Lionel to ask his two companions to join in this slow march up and down? Young men have their little vanities and weaknesses, like other folk. Rumour had on more than one occasion coupled his name with that of some fair damsel: what if he were to say now—Well, if you will talk, here is one worth talking about. He was conscious on this shining morning that Miss Cunyngham—the more beautiful daughter of a beautiful mother—was looking superb: he remembered what Miss Georgie had said about Honnor's proud and graceful carriage. He knew a good many of the people in this slow-moving assemblage; and he was not sorry they should see him talking to this tall and handsome young Englishwoman—who, also, appeared to have a numerous acquaintanceship.

"Why, you seem to know everybody, Mr. Moore!" she said to him, with a smile.

"You would think all London was here this morning — it's really astonishing!" he made answer.

Occasionally they stopped to have a chat with more particular friends; and then Lionel would remain a little bit aside; though once or twice Lady Cunyngham chose to introduce

that pleased him, he hardly knew why. But at last she said——

"Well, I think we must be getting home. Properly speaking we have no right to be in the Prayer-Book Brigade at all, for we have not been to church this morning."

Not unlikely the squire of these two ladies was rather loth to leave this gay assemblage; but he was speedily consoled, for to his inexpressible joy he found, when they got indoors, that there was no one else coming to lunch—these three were to be quite by themselves. And of what did they not talk during this careless, protracted, idling meal! Curiously enough, it was Nina, not Miss Burgoyne, who appeared to have chiefly impressed the two visitors on the preceding evening; and when Lady Cunyngham discovered that she was an old companion and fellow student of Lionel's, she was much interested, and would have him tell her all about his experiences of Naples. And again Miss Honnor recurred to the difference between amateur and professional acting that seemed to have struck her so forcibly the previous night.

"Really, Mr. Moore," said she, "you must have an astonishing amount of good nature and toler-

ance. If I had complete command of any art, and saw a band of amateurs attempting something in it, and not even conscious of their own amateurishness, I don't know whether I should be more inclined to laugh or to be angry. I used to be amused, up there in Strathaivron, with the confidence Georgie Lestrange showed in singing a duet with you——"

"Ah, but Miss Lestrange sings very well," said he. "And, you know, if Lady Adela and her sisters perform a piece like *The Chaplet*—well, that is a Watteau-like sort of thing—Sèvres china—force or passion of any kind isn't wanted—it's all artificial, and confessedly so. And then, when the professional actor finds himself acting with amateurs, I dare say he modifies himself a little——"

"Becomes an amateur, in short," she said.

"In a measure. Otherwise he would be a regular bull in a china shop. And surely, when you get a number of people in a remote place like Strathaivron, the efforts of amateurs to amuse them should be encouraged and approved. I thought it was very unselfish of them—very kind—though they generally succeeded in sending Lord Fareborough to bed. By the way, Miss

Cunyngham, did Lord Fareborough ever get a stag?"

For it was observable that this young man, whenever he got the chance, was anxious to lead away the conversation from the theatre and all things pertaining thereunto, and would rather talk about Strathaivron, and salmon-fishing, and Miss Honnor's plans with regard to the coming year.

"Oh no," she said, "he never went out but that once, and then he nearly killed himself, according to his own account. We never quite knew what happened; there was some dark mystery that Roderick wouldn't explain; and, you know, Lord Fareborough himself is rather short-tempered. He ought not to have gone out—a man who has imagined himself into that hypochondriacal state. However, it has given him an excuse for thinking himself a greater invalid than ever; and he has got it into his head now that we all of us persuaded him to try a day's stalking—a conspiracy, as it were, to murder him. There was some accident at one of the fords, I believe. He came home early. I never heard of his having fired at a stag at all." And then she added, with a smile: "Mr. Moore, what made you send me such a lot of salmon-flies?"

"Oh, well," he said, "I thought you ought to have a good stock." How could he tell her of his vague hope that the Jock Scotts and Silver Doctors might serve for a long time to recall him to her memory?

"I suppose you have got the stag's head by now?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, indeed; and tremendously proud of it I am," he responded eagerly. "You know I should never have gone deer-stalking but for you. I made sure I was going to make a fool of myself——"

"I remember you were rather sensitive, or anxious not to miss, perhaps?" she said, in a very gentle way. "I thought of it again last night, when I saw you so completely master in your own sphere—so much at home—with everything at your command——"

"Oh, yes, very much at home," he answered her, with just a touch of bittterness. "Perhaps it is easy to be at home—in harlequinade—though you may not quite like it." And then once more he refused to talk of the theatre. "I am going to send old Robert some tobacco at Christmas," said he.

"I heard of what you did already in that way,"

she said, smiling. "Do you know that you may spoil a place by your extravagance? I should think all the keepers and gillies in Strathaivron were blessing your name at this very moment."

"And you go up in the Spring, you said?"

"Yes. That is the real fishing-time. My brother Hugh and I have it all to ourselves then: Lady Adela and the rest of them prefer London."

And then it was almost in his heart to cry out to her—May not I, too, go up there if but for a single week—for six clear-shining days in the spring-time! Ben More, Suilven, Canisp—oh, to see them once again!—and the windy skies, and Geinig thundering down its rocky chasm, and Aivron singing its morning song along the golden gravel of its shoals! What did he want with any theatre?—with the harlequinade in which he was losing his life? Could he not escape? Euston-station was not so far away—and Invershin? It seemed to him as though he had already shaken himself free—that a gladder pulsation filled his veins—that he was breathing a sweeter air. The white April days shone all around him; the silver and purple clouds went flying overhead; here he was by the deep brown pools again, with the grey rocks, and the overhanging birchwoods, and the

long shallows filling all the world with that soft, continuous murmur. As for his singing?—oh, yes, he could sing—he could sing, if needs were

O lang, lang may his lady
Look frae the Castle Doune,
Ere she see the Earl o' Moray
Come sounding through the toon—

—but there is no gaslight here—there are no painted faces—he has not to look on at the antics of a clown, with shame and confusion in his heart——

The wild fancy was suddenly snapped in twain: Lady Cunyngham rose: the two younger people did likewise.

"Now, I know you gentlemen like a cigar or cigarette after luncheon," she said to Lionel, "and we are going to leave you quite by yourself—you will find us in the drawing-room when you please."

Of course he would not hear of such a proposal; he opened the door for them, and followed them upstairs. What were cigars or cigarettes to him when he had such a chance of listening to Honnor Cunyngham's low-modulated voice, or watching for a smile in the calmly observant hazel eyes? Indeed, in the drawing-room, as Miss Honnor showed him a large collection of Assiout ware

which had been sent her by an English officer in Egypt (by what right or title, Lionel swiftly asked himself, had any English officer made bold to send Miss Cunyngham a hamper-full of these red-clay idiotcies?) this solitary guest had again and again to remind himself that he must not outstay his welcome. And yet they seemed to find a great deal to talk about; and the elder of the two ladies was exceedingly kind to him; and there was a singular fascination in his finding himself so entirely *en famille* with them. But alas! even if he or they had chosen to forget, the early dusk of the November afternoon was a sufficient warning: the windows told him he had to go. And go he did, at last. He bade them good-bye; with some friendly words still dwelling in his ears he made his way down the dim stairs and had the door opened for him; then he found himself in this now empty and hopeless town of Brighton, that seemed given over to the low, multitudinous murmur of that wide waste of waves.

He did not go along to the Orleans Club; his heart and brain were too busy to permit of his meeting chance acquaintance. He walked away towards Shoreham, till a smart shower made him turn. When he got back to the town, the lamps were

lit, throwing long golden reflections on the wet asphalte; but the rain had ceased; so he continued to pace absently along through this blue twilight, hardly noticing the occasional dark figures that passed. What was the reason, then, of this vague unrest—this unknown longing—this dissatisfaction and almost despair? Had he not been more fortunate than he could have hoped for? He had met Miss Honnor and her mother in the morning, and had been with them all the way down; they had been most kind to him; he had spent the best part of the day with them; they had parted excellent friends; looking back, he could not recall a single word he would have liked unsaid. Then a happy fancy struck him: the moment he got up to town he would go and seek out Maurice Mangan. There was a wholesome quality in Mangan's saturnine contempt for the non-essential things of life; Mangan's clear penetration, his covert sympathy, his scorn of mock-melancholy would help him to get rid of these vapours.

When Lionel returned to town a little after ten o'clock that night he walked along to Mangan's rooms in Victoria Street, and found his friend sitting in front of the fire, alone.

"Glad you've looked in, Lynn."

"Well, you don't seem to be busy, old chap: who ever saw you before without a book or a pipe?"

"I've been musing, and dreaming dreams, and wishing I was a poet," said this tall, thin, languid-looking man, whose abnormally keen grey eyes were now grown a little absent. "It's only a fancy, you know—perhaps something could be made of it by a fellow who could rhyme——"

"But what is it?" Lionel interposed.

"Well," said the other, still idly staring into the fire before him, "I think I would call it 'The cry of the violets'—the violets that are sold in bunches at the head of the Haymarket at midnight. Don't you fancy there might be something in it—if you think of where they came from—the woods and copses—children playing, and all that—and of what they've come to—the gas-glare and drunken laughter and jeers. I would make them tell their own story—I would make them cry to Heaven for swift death and oblivion before the last degradation of being pinned on to the flaunting dress." And then again he said, "No, I don't suppose there's anything in it; but I'll tell you what made me think of it. This morning, as we were coming back from Winstead church—you know how extraordinarily mild it has been

of late, and the lane going down to the church is very well sheltered—I found a couple of violets in at the roots of the hedge—within a few inches of each other, indeed—and I gave them to Miss Francie, and she put them in her Prayer-book and carried them home. I thought the violets would not object to that, if they only knew."

"So you went down to Winstead this morning?"

"Yes."

"And how are the old people?"

"Oh, very well."

"And Francie?"

"Very busy—and very happy, I think. If she doesn't deserve to be, who does?" he continued, rousing himself somewhat from his absent manner. "I suppose, now, there is no absolutely faultless woman; and yet I sometimes think it would puzzle the most fastidious critic of human nature to point out any one particular in which Miss Francie could be finer than she is. I think it would. It is not my business to find fault; I don't want to find fault; but I have often thought over Miss Francie—her occupations, her theories, her personal disposition, even her dress—and I have wondered where the improvement was to be suggested. You

see, she might be a very good woman, and yet have no sense of humour; she might be very charitable, and also a little vainglorious about it; she might have very exalted ideas of duty, and be a trifle hard on those who did not come up to her standards: but in Miss Francie's case these qualifications haven't to be put in at all. She always seems to me to be doing the right thing, and just in the right way—with a kind of fine touch that has no namby-pambyness about it. Oh, she can be firm, too: she can scold them well enough, those children—when she doesn't laugh and pat them on the shoulder the minute after."

"This is indeed something as coming from you, Maurice!" Lionel exclaimed. "Has it been left for you to discover an absolutely perfect human being?"

"It isn't for you to find fault with her anyway," the other said, rather sharply. "She's fond enough of you."

"Who said I was finding fault with her?—not likely I am going to find fault with Francie!" Lionel replied, with sufficient good-humour. "Well, now that you have discovered an absolutely faultless creature, you might come to the help of another who is only too conscious that he has

plenty of faults, and who is so dissatisfied with himself and his surroundings that he is about sick of life altogether."

Notwithstanding the light tone in which he introduced the subject, Mangan looked up quickly, and regarded the younger man with those penetrating grey eyes.

"Where have you been to-day, Lynn?"

"Brighton."

"Among the dukes and duchesses again? Ah, you needn't be angry—I respect as much as anybody those whom God has placed over us—I haven't forgotten my Catechism—I can order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters. But tell me what the matter is. You sick of life?—I wonder what the gay world of London would think of that!"

And therewithal Lionel, in a somewhat rambling and incoherent fashion, told his friend of a good many things that had happened to him of late—of his vague aspirations and dissatisfactions—of Miss Cunyngham's visit to the theatre, and his disgust over the music-hall clowning—of his going down to Brighton that day, and his wish to stand on some other footing with those friends of his: winding up by asking, to Mangan's surprise, how long it would take to study for the bar and get

called, and whether his training—the confidence acquired on the stage—might not help in addressing a jury.

"So the idol has got tired of being worshipped," Mangan said at last. "It is an odd thing. I wonder how many thousands of people there are in London—not merely shop-girls—who consider you the most fortunate person alive—in whose imagination you loom larger than any saint or soldier, any priest or statesman of our own time. And I wonder what they would say if they knew you were thinking of voluntarily abdicating so proud and enviable a position. Well, well!—and the reason for this sacrifice? Of course you know it is a not uncommon thing for women to give up their carriages and luxuries and fine living, and go into a retreat, where they have to sweep out cells, and even keep strict silence for a week at a time, which I suppose is a more difficult business. The reason in their case is clear enough; they are driven to all that by their spiritual needs; they want to have their souls washed clean, by penance and self-denial. But you," he continued—in no unfriendly mood, but with his usual uncompromising sincerity—"whence comes your renunciation? It is simply that a woman has turned

your head. You want to find yourself on the same plane with her; you want to be socially her equal; and to do that you think you should throw off those theatrical trappings. You see, my dear Linn, if I have remembered my Catechism, you have not: you have forgotten that you must learn and labour truly to get your own living, and do your duty in that state of life unto which it has pleased God to call you. You want to change your state of life; you want to become a barrister. What would happen? The chances are entirely against your being able to earn your own living—at least for years; but what is far more certain is that your fashionable friends—whose positions and occupations you admire—would care nothing more about you. You are interesting to them now because you are a favourite of the public, because you play the chief part at the New Theatre. What would you be as a briefless barrister? Who would provide you with salmon-fishing and deer-stalking then? If you aspired to marry one of those dames of high degree, what would be your claims and qualifications? You say you would almost rather be a gillie in charge of dogs and ponies. A gillie in charge of dogs and ponies doesn't enjoy many conversations with his young mistress; and if he

made bold to demand any closer alliance, Pauline would pretty soon have that Claude kicked off the premises—and serve him right. If you had come to me and said, 'I am too well off; I am being spoiled and petted to death; the simplicity and dignity of life is being wholly lost in all this fashionable flattery, this public notoriety and applause; and to recover myself a little—as a kind of purification—I am going to put aside my trappings; I will go and work as a hod-carrier for three months or six months; I will live on the plainest fare; I will bear patiently the cursing the master of the gang will undoubtedly hurl at me; I will live on the plainest food, and sleep on a straw mattress'—then I could have understood that. But what is it you renounce?—and why? You think you would recommend yourself better to your swell friends if you dropped the theatre altogether——"

"Don't you want to hire a hall!" said Lionel, gloomily.

"Oh, nobody likes being preached at less than I do myself," Mangan said, with perfect equanimity, "but you see I think I ought to tell you, when you ask me, how I regard the situation. And mind you, there is something very heroic [illegible] impracti-

cably heroic—but magnanimous all the same—in your idea that you might abandon all the popularity and position you have won as a mere matter of sentiment. Of course you won't do it. You couldn't bring yourself to become a mere nobody—as would happen if you went into chambers and began reading up law books. And you wouldn't be any nearer to salmon-fishing and deer-forests that way; or to the people who possess these by birth and inheritance. The trouble with you, Linn, my boy, as with both of us, is that you weren't born in the purple. It is quite true that if you were called to the bar you could properly claim the title of esquire, and you would find yourself not further down than the hundred and fiftieth or hundred and sixtieth section in the tables of precedence; but if you went with this qualification to those fine friends of yours, they would admit its validity, and let you know at the same time you were no longer interesting to them. *Harry Thornhill*, of the New Theatre, has a free passport everywhere; Mr. Lionel Moore, of the Middle Temple, wouldn't be wanted anywhere."

"You are very worldly-wise to-night, Maurice."

"I don't want to see you make a sacrifice that wouldn't bring you what you expect to gain by it,"

Mangan said. "But, as I say, you won't make any such sacrifice. You have had your brain turned by a pretty pair of eyes—perhaps by an elegant figure—and you have been troubled, and dissatisfied, and dreaming dreams."

"If that is your conclusion and summing-up of the whole matter," Lionel said, with studied indifference, "perhaps you will offer me a drink, and I'll have a cigarette, and we can talk about something on which we are likely to agree."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," Mangan said, with a laugh; and he went and brought forth what modest stores he had; and he was quite willing that the conversation should flow into another channel.

And little did Lionel know that at this very moment there was something awaiting him at his own rooms that would (far more effectually than any reasoning and plain speaking) banish from his mind, for the moment at least, all those restless aspirations and vague regrets. When eventually he arrived in Piccadilly and went upstairs, he was not expecting any letters, this being Sunday; and as there was on the table only a small parcel, he would probably have left that unheeded till the morning (no doubt it was a pair of worked slippers,

or a couple of ivory-backed brushes, or something of the kind) but that in passing he happened to glance at the note on the top of it, and he observed that the handwriting was foreign. He took it up carelessly, and opened it; his carelessness soon vanished. The message was from Mlle. Girond; and it was in French.

"Dear Mr. Moore,

"To-day Mrs. Grey and I have called twice at your apartments, but in vain, and now I leave this letter for you. It is frightful, what has happened; Nina has gone, no one knows where; we can hear nothing of her. This morning when I came down to her room, she was gone; there was a letter for me, one for Mr. Lehmann, one for Miss Constance, asking her to be ready to sing to-morrow night, another to Mrs. Grey, with money for the apartments until the end of the month, and also there was this little packet for you. In her letter to me she asks me to see them all delivered; during the night she must have made these arrangements; in the morning she is gone! I am in despair; I know not what to do. Will you have the goodness to come down to-morrow as soon as possible?

"Estelle."

And then mechanically he drew a chair to the table, and sate down and pulled the small package towards him: perhaps the contents might help to explain this extraordinary thing that had occurred. But the moment that he took the lid off the pasteboard box he was more bewildered than ever; for the first glimpse told him that Nina had returned to him all the little presents he had made to her in careless moments.

"Nina!" he said, under his voice, in a tone of indignant reproach.

Yes, here was every one of them, from the enclasped loving-cup to the chance trinkets he had purchased for her just as they happened to attract his eye. He took them all out: there was no letter, no message of any kind. And then he asked himself, almost angrily, what sort of mad freak was this. Had the wayward and petulant Nina—forgetting all the suave and gracious demeanour she had been teaching herself since she came to England—had she run away in a fit of temper, breaking her engagement at the theatre, and causing alarm and anxiety to her friends, all about nothing? For he and she had not quarrelled in any way whatsoever, as far as he knew. One fancy, at least, never occurred to him—or,

if it occurred to him, it was dismissed in a moment —that Nina might have had a secret lover—that she had honestly wished to return these presents before making an elopement. It was quite possible that Nicolo Ciana, if he had heard of Nina's success in England, might have pursued her, and sought to marry so very eligible a helpmeet; but if the young man with the greasy hair and the sham jewellery and the falsetto voice had really come to this country, Lionel knew who would have been the first to bid him return to his native shores and his *zuccherelli*. Had not Nina indignantly denied that he had ever dared to address her as '*Nenna mia*,' or that his perpetual '*Antoniella, Antonià*' in any way referred to her? No; Lionel did not think that Nicolo Ciana had much to do with Nina's disappearance.

And then, as he regarded this little box of useless jewellery, another wild guess flashed through his brain, leaving him somewhat breathless, almost frightened. Was it possible that Nina had mistaken these gifts for love-gifts—had discovered her mistake—and, in a fit of wounded pride, had flung them back and fled for ever from this England that had deceived her? He was not vain enough to think there could be anything more

serious, that Nina might be breaking her heart over what had happened to her; but it was quite enough if he had unconsciously led her to believe that he was paying her attentions. He looked at that loving-cup with some pricking of conscience; he had to confess that such a gift was capable of misconstruction. It had never occurred to him that she might regard it as some kind of mute declaration—as a pledge of affection between him and her that necessitated no clearer understanding. He had seen the two tiny goblets in a window; he had been taken by the pretty silver-gilt ornamentation; he had been interested in the old-fashioned custom; and he had lightly imagined that Nina would be pleased—that was all. And now that he thought of it, he had to confess he had been indiscreet. It is true he had given Nina those presents from time to time in a careless and haphazard fashion that ought not to have been misunderstood—only, as he had to remind himself, Nina must have perceived that he did not give similar presents to Miss Burgoyne, or Estelle Girond, or anybody else in the theatre. And was Nina now thinking that he had treated her badly?—Nina, who had been always his sympathising friend, his gentle adviser, and kind com-

panion? Was there any one in the world that he less wished to harm? He supposed she must have been angry when she returned these jewels and gewgaws: clearly she was too proud to send him any other message. And now she would be away somewhere—where he could not get hold of her to pet her into a reconciliation again; no doubt there was some hurt feeling of injury in her heart; perhaps she was even crying.

"Poor Nina!" he said to himself (little dreaming of the true state of affairs). "I hope it isn't so; but if it is so, here have I, through mere thoughtlessness, wounded her pride, and, what is more, interfered with her professional career. I suppose she'll go right away to old Pandiani; and they'll be precious glad to get her now at Malta, after her success in England. Perhaps some day we shall hear of her coming over here again—as a famous star in Grand Opera; that will be her revenge. But I never thought Nina would want to be revenged on me."

And yet he was uneasy; there was something in all this he did not understand; he began to long for the coming of the next day, that he might go away down to Sloane Street and hear what Miss Girond had to tell him. Why, for example,

he asked himself, had Nina taken this step so abruptly—so entirely without warning? How and when had she made the discovery that she had mistaken the intention of those friendly little acts of kindness and his constant association with her? Then he tried to remember on what terms he had last parted from her. It was at the theatre, as he patiently summoned up each circumstance. It was at the theatre, on the preceding night. She had come to him in the wings, observing that he looked rather vexed, and she had given him comforting and cheerful words, as was her wont. Surely there was no anger in her mind against him then? But thereafter? Well, he had seen no more of Nina. When Miss Cunyngham had come behind the scenes, he had forgotten all about Nina. And then suddenly he remembered that he must have been standing close by the prompter's box, absorbed in talking to Miss Cunyngham, when Nina would have to come up to go on the stage. Had she passed them? Had she suspected? Had she, in her proud and petted way, resented this intimacy, and resolved to throw back to him the harmless little gifts he had bestowed on her? Poor Nina!—she had always been so wilful—so easily pleased, so easily offended: but

of late he had rather forgotten that; for she had been bearing herself with what she regarded as an English manner; and indeed their friendship had been so constant and unvarying, so kind and considerate on both sides, that there had been no opportunity for the half-vexed, half-laughing quarrels of earlier days. He would seek out this spoiled child (he said to himself) and scold her into being good again. And yet, even as he tried to persuade himself that all would still be well, he could not help recalling the fierce vehemence with which Nina had repudiated the suggestion that perhaps she might let some one else drink out of this hapless loving-cup that now lay before him. "I would rather have it dashed to pieces and thrown into the sea!" she had said, with pale face, and quivering lips, and eyes bordering on tears. He remembered that he had been a little surprised at the time—not thinking what it all might mean.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CRISIS.

When he went down to Sloane-street in the morning, he found Estelle eagerly awaiting him. She received him in Nina's small parlour; Mrs. Grey had just gone out. A glance round the room did not show him any difference, except that a row of photographs (of himself, mostly, in various costumes) had disappeared from the mantel-shelf.

"Well, what is all this about?" he said, somewhat abruptly.

"Ah, do not blame me too quick!" Estelle said, with tears springing to her clear blue eyes. "Perhaps I am to blame—perhaps, when I see her in such trouble on Saturday night, I should entreat her to tell me why; but I said 'To-night I will not worry her more; to-morrow morning I will talk to her; we will go for a long walk together; Nina will tell me all her sorrow.' Then the morn-

ing comes, and she is gone away, what can I do? Twice I go to your apartment—— "

"Oh, I am not blaming you at all, Miss Girond," he said at once and quite gently. "If anybody is to blame, I suppose it's myself, for I appear to have quarelled with Nina without knowing it. Of course you understood that that packet you left yesterday contained the various little presents I have given her from time to time—worthless bits of things—but all the same her sending them back shows that Nina has some ground of offence. I'm very sorry: if I could only get hold of her I would try to reason with her; but she was always sensitive and proud and impulsive like that. And then to run away because of some fancied slight—— "

Estelle interrupted him with a little gesture of impatience, almost of despair.

"Ah, you are wrong, you are wrong," she said. "It is far more serious than that. It is no little quarrel. It is a pain that stabs to the heart—that kills. You will see Nina never again to make up a little quarrel. She has taken her grief away with her. I myself, when I first saw her troubled at the theatre, I also made a mistake—I thought she was hysteric—— "

"At the theatre?" said he, with some sudden recalling of his own surmise.

"You did not regard her, perhaps, towards the end of her part, on Saturday night?" said Estelle. "I thought once she would fall on the stage. On the way home I think she was crying—I did not look. Then she is in this room—oh, so silent and miserable—as one in despair; until I persuade her to go to sleep until the morning, when she would tell me her sorrow. Then I was reading; I heard something; I went to the door there—it was Nina crying, oh, so bitterly; and when I ran to her, she was wild with her grief. 'My life is broken, Estelle, my life is broken!' she said—— "

But here Estelle herself began to sob, and could not get on with her story at all: she arose from her chair and began to pace up and down.

"I cannot tell you—it was terrible—— "

And terrible it was for him, too, to have this revelation made to him. Now he knew it was no little quarrel that had sent Nina away; it was something far more tragic than that; it was the sudden blighting of a life's hopes.

"Estelle," said he (quite forgetting), "you spoke of a letter she had left for you: will you show it to me?"

She took it from her pocket and handed it to him. There was no sign of haste or agitation in these pages; Nina's small and accurate handwriting was as neat and precise as ever; she even seemed to have been careful of her English as she was leaving this her last message, in the dead watches of the night.

"Dear Estelle," Nina wrote, "forgive me for the trouble I cause you; but I know you will do what I ask, for the sake of our friendship of past days. I leave a letter for Mr. Lehmann, and one for Miss Constance, and a packet for Mr. Moore; will you please have them all sent as soon as possible? I hope Mr. Lehmann will forgive me for any embarrassment; but Miss Constance is quite perfect in the part; and if she gets the letter to-day it will be the longer notice. I enclose a ring for you, Estelle; if you wear it, you will sometimes think of Nina. For it is true what I said to you when you came into my room to-night—I go away in the morning. I have made a terrible mistake, an illusion, a folly, and now that my eyes are opened, I will try to bear the consequences as I can; but I could not go on the stage as well; it would be too bad a punishment; I could not, Estelle. I must go, and forget—it is so easy to

say forget! I go away without feeling injured towards any one; it was my own fault, no one was in fault but me. And if I have done wrong to any one, or appear ungrateful, I am sorry; I did not wish it. Again I ask you to say to Mr. Lehmann, who has been so kind to me in the theatre, that I hope he will forgive me the trouble I cause; but I *could not* go on with my part just now.

"Shall I ever see you again, Estelle? It is sad, but I think not; it is not so easy to forget as to write it. Perhaps some day I send you a line—no, perhaps some day I send you a message; but you will not know where I am; and if you are my friend you will not seek to know. Adieu, Estelle! I hope you will always be happy, as you are good; but even in your happiest days you will sometimes give a thought to poor Nina."

He sate there looking at the letter long after he had finished reading it; there was nothing of the petulance of a spoiled child in this simple, this heartbroken farewell. And Nina herself was in every phrase of it—in her anxiety not to be a trouble to any one—her gratitude for very small kindnesses—her wish to live in the gentle remembrance of her friends.

"But why did no one stop her?—why did no one remonstrate?" he asked, in a sort of stupefaction.

"Who could, then?" said Miss Girond, returning to her seat, and clasping her hands in front of her. "As soon as the housemaid appears in the morning, Nina asks her to come into the room; the money is put into an envelope for Mrs. Grey; the not great luggage is taken quiet down the stair, so that no one is disturbed. Everything is arranged; you know Nina was always so—so business-like——"

"Yes, but the fool of a housemaid should have called Mrs. Grey!" he exclaimed.

"But why, Mr. Moore?" Estelle continued. "She only thought that Nina was so considerate—no one to be awakened—and then a cab is called, and Nina goes away——"

"And of course the housemaid didn't hear what direction was given to the cabman!"

"No, it is a misfortune," said Estelle, with a sigh. "It is a misfortune, but she is not so much in fault. She did not conjecture—she thought Nina was going to catch an early train—that she did not wish to disturb any one. All was in order; all natural, simple; no one can blame her. And so poor Nina disappears——"

"Yes, disappears into the world of London, or into the larger world, without friends, without money—had she any money, Miss Girond?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" Estelle exclaimed. "You did not know? Ah, she was so particular; always exact in her economies; and sometimes I laughed at her; but always she said perhaps some day she would have to play the part of the—the—benevolent fairy to some poor one, and she must save up——"

"Had she a bank-account?"

Estelle nodded her head.

"Then she could not have got the money yesterday, if she wished to withdraw it: she must have been in London this morning!"

"Perhaps," said Estelle. "But then? Look at the letter. She says if I am her friend, I will not seek to know where she is."

"But that does not apply to me," he retorted—while his brain was filled with all sorts of wild guesses as to whither Nina had fled.

"You are not her friend?" Estelle said, quietly.

"If I could only see her for three minutes!" he said in his despair, as he rose and went to the window. "Why should she go away from her friends if she is in trouble? Besides ourselves and the people in the theatre, she knows no one

in this country. If she goes away back to her acquaintances in Italy, she will not say a word; she will have no sympathy, no distraction of any kind; and all the success she has gained here will be as good as lost. It is like Nina to say she blames no one; but her sending me back those bits of jewellery tells me who is to blame——"

Estelle hesitated.

"Can I say?" she said, in rather low tones, and her eyes were cast down. "Is it not breaking confidence? But Nina was speaking of you—she took me into the shop in Piccadilly to show me the beautiful gold cup—and when I said to her 'It is another present soon—it is a wedding-ring soon he will give you——'"

"Then it is you who have been putting those fancies into her head!" he said, turning to her.

"I? Not I!" answered Estelle, with a quick indignation. "It is you! Ah, perhaps you did not think—perhaps you are accustomed to have every ones—to have every one—give homage to the great singer—you amuse the time—what do you care? I put such things into her head? No! —not at all! But you! You give her a wishing-cup—what is the wish? You come here often—you are very kind to her—oh, yes, very kind, and

Nina is grateful for kindness—you sing with her—what do you call them?—songs of love. Ah, yes, the *chansons amoureuses* are very beautiful—very charming—but sometimes they break hearts."

"I tell you I had no idea of anything of the kind," he said—for to be rated by the little boy-officer was a new experience. "But I am going to try to find Nina—whatever you may choose to do."

"I respect her wish," said Miss Girond, somewhat stiffly. However, the next moment she had changed her mood. "Mr. Moore, if you were to find her, what then?" she asked, rather timidly.

"I should bring her back to her friends," he answered, simply enough.

"And then?"

"I should want to see her as happy and contented as she used to be—the Nina we used to know. I should want to get her back to the theatre, where she was succeeding so well. She liked her work; she was interested in it; and you know she was becoming quite a favourite with the public. Come, Miss Girond," he said, "you needn't be angry with me: that won't do any good. I see now I have been very thoughtless and careless; I ought not to have given her that loving-cup; I ought not to have given her any of

those trinkets, I suppose. But it never occurred to me at the time; I fancied she would be pleased at the moment, that was all."

"And you did not reflect, then," said Estelle, regarding him for a second, "what it was that may have brought Nina to England at the beginning?—no?—what made her wish to play at the New Theatre? Ah, a man is so blind!"

"Brought Nina to England?" he repeated, rather bewildered.

"But these are only my conjectures," she said, quickly. "No, I have no secrets to tell. I ask myself what brings Nina to England, to the New Theatre, to the companionship with her old friend —I ask myself that, and I see. But you—perhaps it is not your fault that you are blind: you have so many ladies seeking for favour you have no time to think of this one or that, or you are grown indifferent, it may be. Poor Nina! she that was always so proud, too; it is herself that has struck herself; a deep wound to her pride; that is why she goes away, and she will never come back. No, Mr. Moore, she will never come back. I asked you what you would do if you were to find her—it is useless. She will never come back: she is too proud."

Estelle looked at her watch.

"Soon I must go in to the theatre. There was a note from Mr. Lehmann this morning; he wishes me to go over some parts with Miss Constance, to make sure."

"What hour have you to be there?" he said, taking up his hat.

"Half-past eleven."

"I will walk in with you, if you like," he said; "there will be time. And I want to see that Lehmann isn't put to any inconvenience; for, you know, I introduced Nina to the New Theatre."

On their way into town Estelle was thoughtful and silent; while Lionel kept looking far ahead, as if he expected to descry Nina coming round some street-corner or in some passing cab. But at last his companion said to him—

"You had no quarrel, then, with Nina, on the Saturday night?"

"None! On the contrary, the last time she spoke to me was in the most kindly way!" he said.

"Then why does she resolve to send you back those presents?" Estelle asked. "Why is it she knows all at once that her life is broken? You have no conjecture at all?"

"Well," said he, with a little hesitation, "it is a

difficult thing to speak of. If Nina was looking forward as you think—if she mistook the intention of those trinkets I gave her—well, you know, there was a young lady and her mother, two friends of mine, who came to the theatre on Saturday night, and I dare say Nina passed while I was talking to the young lady in the wings—and—and Nina may have imagined something. I can only guess—it is possible——"

"Now I know," said Estelle, rather sadly. "Poor Nina! And still you think she would come back if you could find her? Her pride makes her fly from you; and you think you would persuade her? Never, never! She will not come back—she would drown herself first."

"Oh, don't talk like that!" he said, with frowning brows; and both relapsed into silence and their own thoughts.

Mr. Lehmann did not seem much put about by this defection on the part of one of his principal singers.

"It is a pity," he said to Lionel. "She had a fresh voice; she was improving in her stage-business; and the public liked her. What on earth made her go off like this?"

"She left no explanation with me," Lionel said,

honestly enough. "But in her letter to Miss Girond she hopes you won't be put to any inconvenience. By the way, if Miss Ross owes you any forfeit, I'll settle that up with you."

"No, there's no forfeit in her agreement; it wasn't considered necessary," the Manager made answer. "Of course I am assuming that it's all fair and square, that she hasn't gone off to take a better engagement——"

"You needn't be afraid of that," Lionel said, briefly; and as Miss Constance here made her appearance, he withdrew from the empty stage, and presently had left the building.

He thought he would walk up to the Restaurant Gianuzzi in Rupert-street, and make enquiries there. But he was not very hopeful. For one thing, if Nina were desirous of concealment or of getting free away, she would not go to a place where, as he knew, she had lodged before; for another, he had disapproved of her living there all by himself, and Nina never even forgot his least expression of opinion. When he asked at the Restaurant if a young lady had called there on the previous day to engage a room, he was answered that they had no young-lady visitor of any kind in the house: he was hardly disappointed.

But as he walked along and up Regent Street (here were the well-remembered shops that Nina and he used to glance into as they passed idly on, talking sometimes, sometimes silent, but very well content in each other's society) he began to ask himself whether in truth he ought to seek out Nina and try to intercept her flight, even if that were yet possible. Estelle's questions were significant. What would he do, supposing he could induce Nina to come back? At present, he vaguely wished to restore the old situation—to have Nina again among her friends, happy in her work at the theatre, ready to go out for a stroll with him if the morning were fine. He wanted his old comrade, who was always so wise, and prudent, and cheerful, whom he could always please by sending her down a new song, a new waltz, an Italian illustrated journal, or some similar little token of remembrance. But if Estelle's theory were the true one, *that* Nina was gone for ever, never to return; her place was vacant now, never to be refilled; and somehow or other—perhaps hidden in London, perhaps on her way back to her native land—there was a woman, proud, silent, and tearless, her heart quivering from the blow that he had unintentionally dealt. How could he face *that*

Nina? What humble explanations and apologies could he offer? To ask her to come back would of itself be an insult. Her wrongs were her defence; she was sacred from intrusion, from expostulation and entreaty.

At the theatre that evening, he let the public fare as it liked, so far as his part in the performance was concerned. He got through his duties mechanically. The stage lacked interest; the wings were empty; the long glazed corridor conveyed a mute reproach. As for the new *Clara*, Miss Constance did fairly well: she had not much of a voice; but she was as bold as brass; and her "cheek" seemed to be approved by the audience. At one point Estelle came up to him.

"Is it not a change for no Nina to be in the theatre? But there is one that is glad—oh, very glad! Miss Burgoyne rejoices!"—and Estelle, as she passed on, made use of a phrase, in French, which, perhaps fortunately, he did not understand.

After the performance, he went up to the Garden Club—he did not care to go home to his own rooms, and sit thinking. And the first person he saw after he passed into the long coffee-room was Octavius Quirk, who was seated all by himself, devouring a Gargantuan supper.

"This is luck," Lionel said to himself. "Maurice's Jabberwock will begin with his blatherskite nonsense—it will be something to pass the time."

But on the contrary, as it turned out, the short fat man with the unwholesome complexion was not at this moment in a humour for frothy and windy invective about nothing: perhaps the abundant supper had mollified him: he was quite suave.

"Ah, Moore," said he, "haven't seen you since you came back from Scotland. It was awfully kind of Lady Adela to send me a haunch of venison."

"It would serve you for one meal, I suppose," Lionel thought: he did not say so.

"I dine with them to-morrow night," continued Mr. Quirk, complacently.

"Oh, indeed," said Lionel: Lady Adela seemed rather in a hurry, immediately on her return to town, to secure her tame critic.

"Very good dinners they give you up there at Campden Hill," Mr. Quirk resumed, as he took out a big cigar from his case. "Excellent—excellent—and the people very well chosen, too, if it weren't for that loathsome brute Quincey Hooper. Why do they tolerate a fellow like that—the meanest lick-spittle and boot-blacker to any Eng-

lishman that has got a handle to his name, while all the time he is writing in his wretched Philadelphia rag every girding thing he can think of against England. Comparison, comparison, continually—and far more venomous than the feeble Higginson sort of stuff, which is only Anglophobia and water; and yet Hooper hasn't the courage to speak out either—it's a morbid envy of England that is afraid to declare itself openly, and can only deal in hints and innuendoes. What can Lady Adela see in a fellow like that? Of course he writes puffing paragraphs about her, and sends them to her; but what good are they to her, coming from America? She wants to be recognised as a clever woman by her own set. She appeals to the *dii majorum gentium:* what does she care for the verdict of Washington, or Philadelphia, or New York?"

Well, Lionel had no opinion to express on this point: on a previous occasion he had wondered why these two Augurs had not been content to agree, seeing that the wide Atlantic rolled between their respective spheres of operation.

"I have been favoured," resumed Mr. Quirk, more blandly, "with a sight of some portions of Lady Adela's new novel."

"Already?"

"Oh, it isn't nearly finished yet; but she has had the earlier chapters set up in type, so that she could submit them to — to her particular friends, in fact. You haven't seen them?" asked Mr. Quirk, lifting his heavy and boiled-gooseberry eyes and looking at Lionel.

"Oh, no," was the answer. "My judgment is of no use to her; she is aware of that. I hope you were pleased with what you saw of it. Her last novel was not quite so successful as they had hoped, was it?"

"My dear fellow!" Mr. Quirk exclaimed, in astonishment (for he could not have the power of the log-rollers called in question). "Not successful? Most successful! — most successful! I don't know that it produced so much money—but what is that to people in their sphere?"

"Perhaps not much," said Lionel, timidly (for what did he know about such esoteric matters?) "I suppose the money they might get from a novel would be of little consideration—but it would show that the book had been read."

"And what, again, do they care for vulgar popularity?—the approbation of the common herd —of the bovine-headed multitude? No, no, it is

the verdict of the polished world they seek—it is fame—*éclat*—it is recognition from their peers. It may be only *un succès d'estime*—all the more honourable! And I must say Lady Adela is a very clever woman; the pains she takes to get *Kathleen's Sweethearts* mentioned even now are wonderful. Indeed, I propose to give her an additional hint or two to-morrow. Of course you know —— is doomed?" asked Mr. Quirk, naming a famous statesman who was then very seriously ill.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Gout at the heart; hopeless complications; he can't possibly last another ten days. Very well," continued Mr. Quirk, with much satisfaction, as if Providence were working hand in hand with him, "I mean to advise Lady Adela to send him a copy of *Kathleen's Sweethearts*. Now do you understand? No? Why, man, if there's any luck, when he dies and all the memoirs come out in the newspapers, it will be mentioned that the last book the deceased statesman tried to read was Lady Adela Cunyngham's well-known novel. Do you see? Good business? Then there's another thing she must absolutely do with her new book. These woman-suffrage people are splendid howlers and spouters: let her go in for

woman-suffrage thick and thin — and she'll get quoted on a hundred dozen of platforms. That's the way to do it, you know! Bless you, the publishers' advertisements are no good at all nowadays!"

Lionel was not paying very much heed; perhaps that was why he rather indifferently asked Mr. Quirk whether he himself was in favour of extending the suffrage to women.

"I?" cried Mr. Quirk, with a boisterous horse-laugh. "What do I care about it? Let them suffer away as much as ever they like!"

"Yes, they're used to that, aren't they?" said Lionel.

"What I want to do is to put Lady Adela up to a dodge or two for getting her book talked about; that's the important and immediate point; and I think I can be of some service to her," said Mr. Quirk; and then he added more pompously: "I think she is willing to place herself entirely in my hands."

Happily at this moment there came into the room two or three young gentlemen, intent upon supper and subsequent cards, who took possession of the further end of the table; and Lionel was glad to get up and join the new comers, for he felt

he could not eat in the immediate neighbourhood of this ill-favoured person. He had his poached eggs and a pint of hock in the company of these new friends; and after having for some time listened to their ingenuous talk—which was chiefly a laudation of Miss Nellie Farren—he lit a cigarette and set out for home.

So it was Octavius Quirk who was now established as Lady Adela's favourite? It was he who was shown the first sheets of the new novel; it was he who was asked to dinner immediately on the return of the family from Scotland; it was he who was to be Lady Adela's chief counsellor throughout the next appeal to the British public? And perhaps he advised Lady Sylvia, also, about the best way to get her musical compositions talked of; and might not one expect to find, in some minor exhibition, a portrait of Octavius Quirk, Esq., by Lady Rosamund Bourne? It seemed a gruesome kind of thing to think of these three beautiful women paying court to that lank-haired, puffy, bilious-looking baboon. He wondered what Miss Georgie Lestrange thought of it; Miss Georgie had humorous eyes, that could say a good deal. And Lord Rockminster—how did Lord Rockminster manage to tolerate this uncouth creature?—was

his good-natured devotion to his three accomplished sisters equal even to that?

Lionel did not proceed to ask himself why he had grown suddenly jealous of a man whom he himself had introduced to Lady Adela Cunyngham. Yet the reason was not far to seek. Before his visit to Scotland, it would have mattered little to him if any one of his lady-friends—or any half-dozen of them, for the matter of that—had appeared inclined to put some other favourite in his place; for he had an abundant acquaintance in the fashionable world; and, indeed, had grown somewhat callous to their polite attentions. But Lady Adela and her two sisters were relations of Honnor Cunyngham; they were going down to Brighton this very week; he was anxious (though hardly knowing why) to stand well in their opinion and be of importance in their eyes. As he now walked home he thought he would go and call on Lady Adela the following afternoon: if she were going down to that house in Adelaide Crescent, there would be plenty of talk amongst the women folk; his name might be mentioned.

Next morning there was no further word of Nina. When he had got his fencing over, he went along to Sloane-street, but hardly with any expectation of

news. No; Estelle had nothing to tell him: Nina had gone away—and wished to remain undiscovered.

"Poor Nina!" said Estelle, with a sigh.

Somewhat early in the afternoon he went up to Campden Hill. Lady Adela was at home. He noticed that the manservant who ushered him into the drawing-room was very slow and circumspect about it, as if he wished to give ample warning to those within; and, indeed, just as he had come into the hall, he had fancied he heard a faint shriek, which startled him not a little. When he now entered the room he found Miss Georgie Lestrange standing in the middle of the floor, while Lady Adela was seated at a small writing-table a little way off. They both greeted him in the most friendly fashion; and then Miss Georgie (a little embarrassed, as he imagined) went towards the French window and looked out into the wintry garden.

"You have come most opportunely, Mr. Moore," said Lady Adela, in her pleasant way. "I'm sure you'll be able to tell us: how high would a woman naturally throw her arms on coming suddenly on a dead body?"

He was somewhat staggered.

"I—I'm sure I don't know."

"You see, Georgie has been so awfully kind to me this morning," Lady Adela continued. "I have arrived at some very dramatic scenes in my new story, and she has been good enough to act as my model; I want to have everything as vivid as possible; and why shouldn't a writer have a model as well as a painter? I hope to have all the attitudes strictly correct—to describe even the tone of her shriek when she comes upon the dead body of her brother. Imagination first, then actuality of detail: Rose tells me that Mr. Mellord, after he has finished a portrait, won't put in a blade of grass or a rosecleaf without having it before him. If there's to be a crust of bread on the table, he must have the crust of bread."

"Yes, but Mr. Moore," said Miss Georgie, coming suddenly back from the window—and she was blushing furiously, up to the roots of her pretty golden-red hair, and covertly laughing at the same time, "my difficulty is that I try to do my best as the woman who unexpectedly sees her dead brother before her; but I've got nothing to come and go on. I never saw a dead body in my life; and it would hardly do to try it with a real dead body——"

"Georgie, don't be horrid!" Lady Adela said,

severely. "Here is Mr. Moore, who can tell you how high the hands should be held, and whether they should be clenched or open."

"Well, Lady Adela," he said, in his confusion (for he was in mortal terror lest she should ask him to get up and posture before her) "the fact is that on the stage there are so many ways of expressing fear or dismay that no two people would probably adopt the same gestures. Would you have her hands above her head? Wouldn't it be more natural for her to have them about the height of her shoulders—the elbows drawn tightly back—her palms uplifted as if to shut away this terrible sight—— "

"Yes, yes!" said Lady Adela, eagerly; and she quickly scribbled some notes on the paper before her. "The very thing!—the very thing!"

"But don't you think," he ventured to say, "that that would look rather mechanical—rather stagey, in fact? I know nothing about writing; but I should think you would want to deal mostly with the expression of the woman's face—— "

"I want to have it all!" the anxious authoress exclaimed. "I want to have attitudes—gestures—everything: to make the picture vivid. I must have the actual tone of her shriek—— "

"Which Mr. Moore heard as he came in," Miss Georgie said, as a kind of challenge.

"Yes, I thought I heard a slight cry," he admitted, gravely.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Moore," said Lady Adela, with her most charming smile, as she began to fold up her notes. "The little piece of realism you have suggested will come in admirably; and I think I've done enough for to-day—thanks to Georgie here, who has just been an Angel of Patience."

Tea followed, and some idle talk, during which Lionel learnt that Lady Adela and her sisters were going down to Brighton the following day. He incidentally mentioned Octavius Quirk's name; whereupon his hostess, who was a sharp and a shrewd woman when she was not dabbling in literature, instantly and graciously explained to him that she had been corresponding a good deal with Octavius Quirk of late, over her new work. She informed him, further, that Mr. Quirk was coming to dine there the next night—what a pity it was that Mr. Moore was engaged every evening at the theatre! When Lionel left, she had persuaded him that he was just as much a favourite as ever: he could very well understand

that she had cultivated Octavius Quirk's acquaintance only in his capacity as a kind of pseudo-literary person.

Day after day of this lonely week passed: Lionel, all unknown to himself, was marching onwards to his fate. On the Saturday there were two performances of *The Squire's Daughter;* at night he was very tired—which was unusual with him: that, or some other palpable excuse, was sufficient to take him down to Victoria Station on the Sunday morning. He had forgotten, or put aside, all Maurice Mangan's cool-blooded presentation of his case; undefined longings were in his brain; the future was to be quite different from the past—and somehow Honnor Cunyngham was the central figure in these mirage-like visions. He had formed no definite plans; he had prepared no persuasive appeal; the only and immediate thing he knew was that he wished to be in the same place with her, breathing the same air with her, with the chance of catching a distant glimpse of her, even if he were himself to remain unseen. Would she be out walking along the sea-front after church? Surely so, when she had Lady Adela and her sisters as her guests. And if not, he would call in the afternoon: how well he remembered the

rather dusky drawing-room, and its curious scent of sweet-briar or some similar perfume. A hushed half-hour there would be something to be treasured up and conned over again and again in subsequent recollection. Would she be sitting near the window, half shadowed by the curtains? Or standing in front of the fire, perhaps absently gazing into it, her tall and elegant figure outlined by the crimson flames?

When he arrived in Brighton he walked rapidly away down to the King's Road, and there he moderated his pace, keeping his eyes alert. The people were beginning to come out from the various churches; and many of them, before going indoors, joined that slow promenade up and down the greensward further west. But look where he might, there was no sign of Lady Cunyngham and her daughter, nor of Lady Adela and her two sisters. They would have been easily distinguishable, he thought. That they were in Brighton, he had no doubt; but apparently they were nowhere in this throng; so rather downhearted he retraced his steps to the Orleans Club, where he passed an hour or two with such acquaintances as he met there.

He was more fortunate in the afternoon. When

he went along to Adelaide Crescent, Lady Cunyngham and her daughter were both at home; and it was with a sense of joyous relief—and yet with a touch of disquietude too—that he found himself ascending the soft-carpeted stairs. When he was shown into the drawing-room, he found only one occupant there—it was Honnor Cunyngham herself, who was standing by a big portfolio set on a brass stand, and apparently engaged in arranging some large photographs. She turned and greeted him very pleasantly, and without any surprise; she went to two low settles coming out at right angles from the fireplace and sate down, while he took a seat opposite her; if he was rather nervous and bewildered at finding himself thus suddenly face-to-face with her, and alone with her, she was quite calm and self-possessed.

"Mother has just gone upstairs; she will be here presently," Miss Honnor said. "But what a pity my sisters did not know you were coming down. After church they all went off to visit an old lady, a great friend of theirs, who can't get out-of-doors nowadays; and I suppose they stayed on so as to keep her company. However, I have no doubt they will be here before long. What a pleasant thing it must be for you," she

added, "to be able to run down to Brighton for a day after a week's hard work at the theatre."

"Yes," he answered, in a half-bitter kind of fashion. "It is a pleasant thing to get away from the theatre—anywhere. I think I am becoming rather sick of the theatre and all its associations."

"Really, Mr. Moore," she said with a smile, "it is surprising to hear you say so—you of all men."

"What comes of it? You play the fool before a lot of idle people, until—until—your nature is subdued to what it works in, I suppose. What service do you do to any human being?—of what use are you in the world?"

"Surely you confer a benefit on the public when you provide them with innocent amusement?" she ventured to say—she had not considered this subject much, if at all.

"But what comes of it? They laugh for an hour or two and go home. It is all gone—like a breath of wind——"

"But isn't mere distraction a useful and wholesome thing?" she remonstrated again. "I know a great philosopher who is exceedingly fond of billiards, and very eager about the game too: but he doesn't expect to gain any moral enlightenment from three balls and a bit of stick. Distraction,

amusement, is necessary to human beings; we can't always be thinking of the problems of life."

"They talk of the divine power of song!" he continued. "Well, what I want to do is this. I can sing a little; and I want to know that this gift I have from nature hasn't been entirely thrown away—scattered to the winds and lost. Here in Brighton they are always getting up morning or afternoon concerts for charitable purposes; and I wish, Miss Honnor, when you happen to be interested in any of these, you would let me know: I should be delighted to run down and volunteer my services. I should be just delighted. It would be something saved. If I were struck down by an illness, and had to lie thinking, I could say to myself that I had done this little scrap of good—not much for a man to do, but I suppose all that could be expected from a singer."

She could not understand this strange disparagement of himself and his profession; and she may have been vaguely afraid of the drift of these confidences: at all events, when she had thanked him for his generous offer, she rose and went to the portfolio.

"There are some things here that I think will interest you, Mr. Moore," she said. "They only

arrived last night, and I was just putting them away when you came in."

He went to the portfolio; she took out two or three large photographs and handed them to him: the first glance showed him what they were—pictures of the Aivron and the Geinig valleys, with the rocks and pools and overhanging woods he knew so well. He regarded them for an instant or two.

"Do you know what first made me long to get away from the theatre?" he said in a low voice. "It was those places there. It was Strathaivron—and you."

"I, Mr. Moore?"

And now he had to go on; he had taken his fate in his hands; there was some kind of despairing recklessness in his brain; his breath came and went quickly and painfully as he spoke.

"Well, I must tell you now, whatever comes of it. I must tell you the truth—you may think it madness—I cannot help that. What I want to do is to give up the theatre altogether. I want to let all that go, with a past never to be regretted—never to be recalled. I want to make for myself a new future—if you will share it with me."

"Mr. Moore!"

Their eyes met: hers frightened, his eagerly and tremblingly expectant.

"There, now you know the truth. Will you say but one word? Honnor—may I hope?"

He sought to take her hand, but she shrank back a step—not in anger, but apparently quite stupefied.

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Moore," she said piteously. "What have I done? How could I imagine you were thinking of any such thing? And—and on my account—that you should dream of making such a sacrifice—giving up your reputation and your position——"

Where was his acting now?—where the passionate appeal he would have made on the stage? He stood stock still—his eyes bent earnestly on hers—and he spoke slowly—

"It is no sacrifice. It is nothing. I wish for another life—but with you—with you. Have you one word of hope to give me?"

He saw his answer already.

"I cannot—I cannot," she said, with downcast eyes, and obviously in such deep distress that his heart smote him.

"It is enough," said he. "I—I was a fool to deceive myself with such imaginings—that are far

beyond me. You will forgive me, Miss Honnor: I did not wish to cause you any pain: why, what harm is done except that I have been too presumptuous and too frank—and you will forgive that. Tell me you forgive me!"

He held out his hand; she took it for a moment; and for another moment he held hers in a firm grasp.

"If I could tell you," he said, in a low voice, "what I thought of you—what every one thinks of you—you might perhaps understand why I have dared to speak."

She withdrew her hand quickly: her mother was at the door. When Lady Cunyngham came into the room, her daughter was apparently turning over those photographs and engravings. Lionel went forward to the elder lady to pay his respects; there was a brief conversation, introduced by Miss Honnor, about Mr. Moore's generous proposal to sing at any charitable concert they might be interested in; and then, as soon as he could, Lionel said good-bye, left the house, and passed into the outer world—where the dusk of the December afternoon was coming down over the far wastes of sea.

END OF VOL. II.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.